

James 4

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] I'll please return to James chapter 4, page 10-12. That's what we're looking at tonight.

Now Jesus said, didn't he, that the world would know we are his disciples by the love that! And yet so often, so often the church doesn't really look like that, does it? So often believers are not as loving towards one another as we should be. I think of some of the church members' meetings I've been in, which I'm sure were worse than local council meetings that some people may have been in. I think of a church where soon after a new minister arrived, a letter appeared in the local paper complaining that the organ was about to be done away with.

And so the whole world got to see what this particular gentleman thought of the new minister and that important issue of whether the organ was playing or not. We could go on. I'm sure we all know stories of Christians arguing with each other in churches with splits and divisions where people fall out. Now why do those things happen? Why do those things happen? That's a question James asked right at the start here tonight. Why is this happening amongst these people he was writing to? And it's fascinating. At the end of chapter 3, the last verse of chapter 3, he talks about the harvest of peace. Chapter 3 ends with peace. Chapter 4 starts with war. There's a contrast between the wisdom that comes down from above, which leads to peace, and the wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, as James calls it, back in chapter 3 verse 15, which leads to war. And as we look at James' words here in chapter 4, he's getting to the heart of what he's been writing about. The heart of the letter, so far he's been like a doctor, slowly showing us one or two test results to show us there might be something wrong. Now he gets the diagnosis. He's laying out the bad news. He's saying, if you do not change your diet, if you do not change your exercise, you will have a heart attack and die. He's giving us the bad news straight up. He wants us to see three things. First of all, the truth, see the truth, the truth about the situation.

Sense the danger and submit wholeheartedly to the remedy. So first of all, he wants them to see the truth. He wants us to see the truth about conflict in the church. So what causes quarrels, what causes fights among you? He writes. And I guess these people would like to have said, it's theological differences. It's because some of us are mature and understand a lot, whereas others are still weak in the faith. Or some of us have the right priorities, some of us do not and need to be taught. And that's not James' answer, is it? What does he say? End of verse 1. Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? Now that word passions in the original language is quite neutral. It could be positive passions or negative things. You could be passionate for good theology. You could be passionate for helping the poor.

You could be passionate for youth work. You could be passionate for outreach. You could be passionate for all sorts of good things. So it's not that they necessarily had bad desires, although it's possible. But the problem is that they're each pursuing these passions and that they're at war within them. In other words, each one wanted to go their own way. Some people wanted particular songs in church, others didn't. Some people wanted a particular focus, others didn't. Some of them thought they were pretty good. Chapter 3, verse 1, they wanted to be teachers. Chapter 3, verse 13, who is wise and understanding among you? Some of them thought they were wise and understanding. And so they wanted to pursue their agenda. But what happens when everyone individually pursues their own pleasures, their only number one priority? That's carnage, isn't it? Look at verse 2. You desire and you do not have, so you murder. You desire your own thing to progress, so you murder. Not literally, of course. But what happens? What happens to me, what happens to you when our desires get thwarted? When the thing we really want, be it at home, at work, or in the church, when that thing doesn't happen?

[4 : 23] Well, we get angry, don't we? And often that anger is found in blaming other people, saying things about other people. And that's what murder is. 1 John, chapter 3, verse 15, John writes,

everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. And do you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him? So in the church situation, I knew of. There were people who sat on opposite sides of the church, had gone for 30 years, and did not speak to each other.

Why? It's because of what happened with a previous minister, like three ministers back, when that minister had left. Some people felt he'd been treated harshly. There'd been a moral issue in his life, some people didn't know about, and they felt he'd been treated harshly and hounded out of the church and not been shown grace. Other people sitting on the other side of the church, not talking to those grace people over there, thought this man had sinned and needed to be disciplined. See what was happening? Both could try and claim some kind of theological position, some kind of biblical argument for their position. And in pursuing their own desires, they would slander and speak evil of the others, and no longer speak to them.

They would murder each other right there in that church. There was an interesting opinion piece from the Guardian on Friday, reflecting the discussions in the Church of England last week. And the writer said this, people are fond of saying that religion causes wars. It's self-righteousness that causes wars. And religion is a marvellous tool for the self-righteous.

That's absolutely brilliant, because it is, isn't it? That's probably what was going on here in the book of the people James was writing to. Not religion causing wars, but self-righteousness.

And religion is such a great tool for creating self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is often just a disguise for our own selfish ambition. So James goes on. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. It's possible to cover all sorts of things. Yes, we can cover our neighbour's car, our neighbour's kitchen, but also we can cover someone else's position, someone else's ministry, someone else's popularity and friendships.

[6 : 43] So pursuing our own desires brings all sorts of conflict. Not only that, but it cuts us off from the Lord himself. Look at the end of verse 2. You do not have because you do not ask, and you ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

Jesus promised, hadn't he? Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Jesus promised his disciples, John chapter 14, if you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

So these Christians were asking lots of things, but it wasn't in Jesus' name. In my old company, you had to get senior managers to sign off if you wanted to do a bit of advertising, or launch a consumer test or something like that, or spend a lot of money. He had to get to sign off. It was their way of saying they could agree with this request. As Jesus says, you can ask anything in my name.

There's a sense in which he's saying, you can ask anything I can sign my name to. But they were asking for things that Jesus could not sign his name to. Because they weren't requesting things that would lead to Jesus' glory, but to their own glory, to their own appetites being fed, to their own popularity, or whatever it was, their own selfish desires. And so they were cut off from God. Their prayers were not being heard. See, James wants them to see the truth about their situation. The truth about the fights the church. They're not theological problems. They're not, because some people are not mature enough. It's not because some people were trying to be faithful and others weren't. The problem is their own sin. Their bickering is because they're each pursuing their own desires.

Now that makes me stop and think, what is it that makes me angry? What is it that makes me want to think ill of somebody else? Because when I find what it is that makes me angry, I will probably find what are the passions and desires that I'm pursuing out of my own self-will, my own selfish ambition, and not actually seeking God's glory. See, James wants us to see the reality, the truth of our situation. But then secondly, he wants us to sense the danger. Look at verse 4. You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world this enmity with God? If you look through this letter, up until now, James has referred to his readers as brothers, or dear brothers. It's all been quite warm in some senses. Now, he takes the gloves off. You adulterous, literally adulterous people. That's spiritual adultery, isn't it? If you're in a house group at the moment, you're studying the book of Hosea.

Hosea is a great example, but it's a truth that is throughout the Bible, that God's relationship with his people is pictured as a marriage. Because God is completely committed to his people.

[9 : 37] He loves us with an unending, unfailing love. He gives his resources graciously to his people. And so the relationship of God to his people is always depicted, or most often depicted, as a marriage. And here, James' readers are running away from the marriage. They are rejecting God.

They're concerned with their own glory, not God's glory. And so that way, they're being worldly. Because the world is all about individuals' own glory. It's all about those pictures I saw the kids show the children earlier. People being so pleased with themselves and promoting their own agendas. It's the way the world works. I'm sure at school, you know, that's like. You have some friends in your class who will ditch you if they can get into the right social group. Because all they care about is themselves, and put themselves first.

I'm sure we all have, or have had, colleagues in the workplace who try very hard to get on with us and be nice to us, and then as soon as we're not going to help their career, or help them look good, they ditch us and focus on other people. Or you know that with the cold callers who call you up trying to sell you double glazing, or whatever it is.

It will be ever so nice and ever so polite, until they realise they're not going to get anywhere, no commission from you. So down the phone goes. It's the way the world works, isn't it? And sadly, too often, the world gets into the church when the church should be getting into the world. So that's why James wants them to sense the danger. Adulteresses, he calls them. Adulteresses. You're going the world's way, not God's way. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Friendship is not like Facebook friendship. It's not clicking on a button someone you barely know. It means sharing the same values as us, sharing the interests in, spending time with. It says you are being friends with the world. You are loving the things the world loves. Self-promotion, seeking your own desires, going your own way. They're the things the world loves. And that means enmity with God. It means you become God's enemies.

What did Christ die to win for his people? It was peace, wasn't it? It was peace. Romans 5.1.

Therefore, since we've been justified by faith, we have peace with God for our Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:02] Yet James is warning his readers that they're drifting away from being friends of God.

Drifting away from that peace to end up as God's enemies. See, Christ died to win peace for us.

That was costly peace. He paid for our selfishness, for our pursuit of our own desires on the cross, in his own flesh. He took God's just judgment for our stubborn refusal to go God's ways.

To win us back, the Lord Jesus submitted completely to his Father's will. He came to be served. So he came to serve, not to be served. He forwent his glory. He forwent the dignity and rights that were naturally his. Why? So we could be God's friends. So how can we drift into worldliness?

James has already held up to us back in, earlier on in this book, back in chapter 2. The possibility of friendship with God, chapter 2, verse 22. The scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God, he was counted to his righteousness, and he was called a friend of God. So we can be friends of God when our faith is completed by acting on that faith, by the works that we do as Abraham's faith was. In contrast, James' readers profess faith with our mouths, but in their hearts, in their lives, they pursue their own agendas. And that's seen throughout this book. They were tolerating divisions and arguments in the church. That's behaving the way the world behaves, isn't it? Now notice, none of them intended to be God's enemies.

It's not what they started out to do. It's something they drift into, because of the flow of the world around them, is going the way the world around them goes. When I was at school, this tells me something about the kind of school I went to. When I was at school, I used to row. And I go, you probably guessed that anyway. And one thing I had to do every winter term, autumn term, was sculling, because I was in a boat on my own. So I didn't have eight, seven other people to help me get out of trouble. And so some races, you go on a river where you see these signs saying, warning, we are ahead. And at that point, you pay careful attention, because the current would often speed up there, and you really didn't want to go over a year. They'd be careful of drifting. You have to be alert to the danger. And these people won't. So James wants them to sense the danger. They're about to slip from being God's friends into being God's enemies, because they're pursuing their own agenda instead of pursuing God's.

The question for us is, how are we doing? How are we doing? Are we in danger of slipping into this as well? Just behaving in the church the way the world behaves? Just wanting what we want? Not thinking about what is actually godly and right? Not thinking about what other people want, what is right and what is best? So if we find ourselves getting irritated by the way things are, by the way other people are, by decisions that have been made, that can all be a sign to us that we're slipping into this worldliness. Or of course, any of the other things James has shown us in this letter can be signs of it. The signs of thinking that faith is just about what we profess, what we say with our mouths, or believe in our heads, and not what is lived out in our lives. The idea that we can listen to

God's word, but not actually have to do anything with it. We saw back at the end of chapter 1. Or the beginning of chapter 2, the way people in James' church were judging each other by worldly standards. They were showing favouritism to the wealthy, and just kind of ignoring the less wealthy. Judging each other by worldly standards. These were all signs, James has been warning them of, that actually they're slipping into worldliness. You know, worldliness isn't watching the wrong movies, or reading the wrong books. Worldliness is primarily taking the attitudes of the world, the attitude of a culture that is in rebellion against God, and slipping into that mode of operating. Slipping into friendship with the world. Now when a husband notices a wife spending a bit of extra time at work, because there's a guy there she really likes. Or getting dressed up to go out with some friends, and he doesn't know quite who she's going with. He's right to feel jealous, isn't he? He's right to think, is she going off with someone else? She's mine. I love her. I want her back. I want her for myself.

[16:49] He's right to feel jealous, isn't he? If he didn't feel jealous, he'd be indifferent and unloving. Well look how God feels about the way these people are behaving. Verse 5.

Verse 5. Let's read verse 4 again. You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world has enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God? Or do you suppose it is to no purpose? The scripture says he yearns jealously over the spirit he has made to dwell in us. It could be the Holy Spirit he has made to dwell in us. It could just be the breath of life he has made to dwell in us. I think more probably.

But God loves the people he has created. He wants us for himself. And he wants that because that's what we're made for. That's best for us as well. So he is jealous when he sees us flirting with the world the way any good husband will be jealous to see his wife flirting with someone in the office or someone she met on the train. Now it seems James isn't writing any particular piece of scripture here. But there's a theme throughout the Bible that God is jealous for his people. Exodus 20 verse 5. You shall not bow down to any idol and servant for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.

Jeremiah 4.24. The Lord your God is a consuming fire. A jealous God. He loves his people. He doesn't want us to drift off into worldliness. He doesn't want us to drift into being like the world around us. Drift into being his enemies. He loves us. So we need to see the truth.

See the truth about divisions in the church. They're not caused by anything other than us following our own design and self. We need to sense the danger. We're in danger of drifting into being God's enemies. So what's the remedy? Well the remedy is in verses 6 to 12. We need to submit wholeheartedly to God. There's this great but at the start of verse 6 isn't it?

[18:44] You know becoming enemies with God. God is jealous. Verse 6 how does it start? But. He gives more grace. He gives more grace. You've dug yourselves into a deep hole but he gives more grace. Grace enough to lift you out. You have lost yourself in an ocean of danger but he gives more grace to send the helicopter to lift you up. He gives more grace.

You're stuck pursuing your grace. You're stuck in fighting with each other and heading towards murdering each other. And you are powerless to change. But he gives more grace. As Augustine said hundreds of years ago, God gives what he demands. God gives what he demands. The remedy is not to pull our socks up. The remedy is not to try harder. The remedy is not to rely on our status, our roles, our spiritual capital, what we've kind of built up in our life through our reading and our prayers and our spiritual service. The remedy is to submit wholeheartedly wholeheartedly to the God who gives more grace. I like Motea put it like this. His resources never come to an end. His patience is never exhausted. His initiative never stops. So how do we receive this more grace? Well it's that verse we read earlier, isn't it? Therefore it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourself therefore to

God. Then look down to the end of verse 10. The promise is repeated in a slightly different way. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. There's perhaps a danger in a church like this where in my 16 months here or whatever, I've noticed you're a very united church. We're a very united church. It's a wonderful thing. The danger is to be proud about that. You're not like those other churches Stuart's spoken about or we know about.

We're much better than that. If we start thinking like that we end up with pride, don't we? And that's not the way forward. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

Or verse 7. Submit yourselves to God. Now that phrase, submit yourselves, literally in the original language it means to place in the right order under. Place everything in the right order under. The problem with James' readers is that their desires were all out of order, weren't they? All over the

place. They put in their own desires. First thing, what God wanted came well down the list. James is saying you submit yourselves. Get all your desires back in order, in the proper order, under God's rule. Sin is disordered love. It's having everything out of order in our lives. Submit ourselves to God so you put them back in the right order. Now what does that mean practically? Well James gives us a couple of pictures.

[21 : 47] Verses 7-10 shows us what it looks like to submit to the Lord in our relationship with God. And in verses 11-12 what it looks like in our lives with other people. So first of all, what does it look like in our walk with God? Well it means a new allegiance. A new allegiance.

Look at verse 7. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. It's a different size of the same coin, aren't they? As we resist the devil, as we draw near to God. All the grace, all the resources for living God's way are found in God. So we need to draw near to him. We draw near to him as we read his work, as we pray, as we meditate on the scriptures. And sometimes we have to resist the devil to do that, don't we? Sometimes Satan whispers in our ear that we, you know, we're too bad.

I know people who've stayed away from coming to church because they feel they're not sorted enough. They feel they've got things in their lives they need to sort out. That's a disaster. That's failing to resist the devil. It's failing to draw near to God, to where the resources are that can make us right and put us back together again. Yes, we need to draw near to him individually. But also draw near to him corporately as we're doing tonight. Put ourselves under the means of grace, under the preaching of his word, under prayer, under the sacraments, as we did this morning, with the Lord's help that we were served. So often people don't come to church, they don't feel like it. They feel it's too hard. Please, if that's you, remember this God who gives more grace. When you feel you've blown it, he's the one who gives more grace. He says, you can come, do come. So you need a new allegiance. You need to have a loyalty to drawing to God and not going the devil's ways. And secondly, submitting to

God means a new wholeness. Look how James goes on. In verse 8, towards the end of it. Cleanse your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Cleansing your hands means repenting of the actions, things we do in our bodies. In the case of these believers, it was fighting and quarreling and pursuing our own desires. And I know what cleansing your hands means for you. Is it dealing with your temper? Is it dealing with your priorities?

Cleansing our hands, also repenting of actions, but purifying our hearts, which means repenting of our attitudes. And here James calls them double-minded again in verse 8. It's a phrase he is back in chapter 1, in verse 6. There they were double-minded because they're wavering between faith and doubt. You've seen their double-mindedness playing out as you go through the letter. Here they're double-minded and they're wavering between being a friend of God or a friend of the world. It's like they're trying to live with foot in both camps. All through this book is beginning to the symptoms of this. Their use of the tongue, they're judging people. They're being hearers of God's word and not doers of it. All that stems from being double-minded. What's the remedy for double-mindedness?

[24 : 58] Well, it's more grace, isn't it? It's more grace. Cleansing our hearts, you double-minded. Psalm 86, verse 11, verse 4 drew our attention to a few months ago in a series on the fear of the Lord. It's a great prayer for the double-minded like me.

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name. That's a prayer for the double-minded, that God would unite our hearts. We'd no longer be double-minded. So submitting to the Lord means he makes us whole. He's repenting of our actions, repenting of our attitudes as well. And thirdly, it means sorrow over sin. Look at verse 9.

Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. The point is not to feel miserable, or merely to appear miserable. The point is our spiritual wholeness should be seen in genuine sorrow over our sin. Genuine sadness. Sadness and sorrow are not just over the consequences of sin. That's the politician's apology. The politician who appears next to his wife, really sorry he's been caught in this adulterous relationship.

Really meaning he's sorry he's been caught. He's not sorry he's actually in a relationship. Sorry about the consequences. Not sorry for the hurt that's been done. And James is saying, don't just regret being caught. Have genuine sorrow for the effect of your sin on this jealous Lord who loves you. He sent his son to die for you. To reclaim you as his own. Weep and more. Pray the Holy Spirit will help us to genuine sorrow. This is what submitting ourselves to the Lord looks like in terms of our relationship with him. He's a new allegiance, a new wholeness, and a genuine sorrow as

laughter turns to weeping.

But this repentance, this drawing near to God, this submitting ourselves to God, is not just some kind of pietistic thing that we do on our own in our rooms. Rather it affects our lives, it affects our relationships. That's what James gets to in verses 11 and 12. And again he's bringing us back to the tongue for the third time in this letter. Because what we do, what the things we say can do such damage, can't they? Verse 11. Do not speak evil against one other brothers. The one who speaks evil against the brother, or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. See when we're jealous, when we want what other people have, then we often end up speaking evil against them. That could be through slander, it could be through gossip, it could be under our breath as we just get angry. And when we do that, what are we doing? We're setting ourselves up as judges over a brother or sister.

[27 : 51] So for example, if you think some people in the church just really aren't serving hard enough. You know, very few people who do most of the work and other people who don't do enough. You start to complain about that and gossip about that. What are we doing when we do that? We're setting ourselves up as judges, aren't we? And yet Jesus has commanded us not to judge. Jesus commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves. We're judging someone, we're not loving them, are we? In fact, Jesus goes on to say, we're judging the law. How are we doing that? Well, I know this experience, I'm sure some of you do, of driving up a motorway is a long way to get from my house in Isleworth to my parents' house in the south of Scotland.

So as I'm driving up the M40 on the style of that journey, I think 70 miles an hour is a really ridiculous speed limit. Because it's going to take forever if I drive at 70. So I act as a judge on the law. So that law doesn't need to apply anymore. I put that law aside and I can drive at 80. I have this internal law, I don't drive any more than 80 usually, usually. But what am I doing? I'm acting as a judge on the law. Jesus says that's what we do as believers when we judge or slander or gossip about other believers. Acting as judges of the law. And that's serious, isn't it? Because there is only one lawgiver and one judge.

So if you're judging God's law, you're not submitting to him. If we're judging God's law, if we're judging our neighbours, if we're complaining about others in the church, then we're not submitting to God. If we are submitting to God, it will be seen in the relationships of those around us.

So here's the remedy for divisions and arguments in the church. It's to see the truth. These frictions and troubles are caused by our own, pursuing our own pleasures. We need to sense the danger. We're starting to live the world's way, pursuing our own desires, not God's will, not the harvest of peace, which he's talked about at the end of chapter 3. And that's dangerous.

We're in danger of becoming God's enemies. And so the remedy is to submit wholeheartedly to the Lord. Let's look again at that promise in verse 10. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. We pursue our own passions to exalt ourselves, don't we? That's why we do it. We want to be noticed. We want other people to think highly of us. But who do we really need to be exalted by in our lives? By our peers? By our friends and neighbours? By our colleagues? No. There's only one opinion that really counts, isn't there? It's the opinion of our Lord on judgment day. Because that's what James is referring to here. The coming judgment is never far from what he writes in this letter. If we submit ourselves to the Lord now, if we humble ourselves before the Lord now, we will be exalted by him on that day he comes back.

[30 : 56] That's why he makes this impassioned plea to repent of the spiritual adultery and come to the Lord in humility so he can make us whole again now and lift us up on the last day.

Now this is a danger in every church. I think of one church I know well, many miles away, I don't know very well, I don't know about, many miles away, where suddenly there's been a great division. Suddenly there's been all sorts of falling outs and problems. In a church which had faithful biblical ministry for years and wise, godly elders, and yet the devil loves to get in. He loves to cause trouble. Yet my father was telling me recently that in this church, with his great rich heritage, one Sunday, an older couple in the church, very well respected, very well loved, came to the front and publicly confessed that they had had a wrong attitude to certain people in the church, that they dealt in wrong ways and said wrong things. They confessed that they'd done wrong because the damage that had been caused was public. And so they repented of it publicly. I don't know what prompted them, other than the Holy Spirit, but maybe they'd been reading something like this in James. Maybe they saw how they perceived their own agendas. And so they humbled themselves before the Lord. They wept and mourned for their sin publicly and confessed it. How can such a big

change come about? Because God is a God who offers more grace. As we humble ourselves before him, he will transform the situations and lift us up.
Let's pray.