

Lesson Nine THE TEST OF WORLDLINESS

4:1-12

In verses 1 through 12 of this chapter, James exposes our faith to the test of worldliness. The connection between the last two verses of the third chapter, and the first three verses of this chapter is very clear: James startles us by presenting a sudden transition from the beautiful picture of a life governed by heavenly wisdom, to the appalling picture which is now before us. It is an out and out church fight, a knock-um down, drag-um out kind at that. We often have the impression that the early churches were characterized by peace and harmony. Right after the time of Pentecost we are told that those **“that believed were of one heart and mind.”** (Acts 4:32). This picture of harmony in the church had now faded in the span of a decade or more. The recipients of James’ letter are now fighting, quarreling, and filled with selfish desires which result in acts of sin. When we examine some of the early churches, we discover that they had their share of conflicts. The members of the Corinthian church were competing with each other in the church services and even suing each other in court (1 Corinthians 6:1-8; 14:23-40). The Galatians believers were **“biting and devouring”** one another (Galatians 5:15). Paul had to admonish the Ephesians to unity in the church (Ephesians 4:1-16). The church at Philippi had two women who could not get along together (Philippians 4:1-3). The churches in the book of Revelation had their share of problems.

Back in 1:27, James described that one characteristic of pure religion is to keep oneself **“unspotted from the world.”** The members of this church were not doing so. James traces the problem to that of the **“friendship of the world”** in 4:4. This is what is known as worldliness. James has shown how worldly wisdom produces worldly disharmony (3:15,16), now he is going to administer a stinging rebuke of their conduct.

In I John 2:15-17 we read, **“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”** It is my belief that nearly all of the problems that are continually coming up in our churches today, come from the root of worldliness. But just what is worldliness? The average Christian in a typical fundamental, conservative church would give one of several answers. Some would say it is the kind of amusements you attend or participate in.

What kind of movies do you attend, or what TV shows do you watch? Do you dance? Do you smoke or drink?

Others would say it is the kind of crowd you run around with. Others say it is the kind of conversation you engage in. Someone else says it is the way you dress. Still others would say it is someone who does not go to church, and spends all the time making money on the job, or seeking pleasure in recreational activities. James would disagree with all these answers. They may be symptoms of the disease, but nobody ever died of symptoms, they die of the disease. The real problem of worldliness lies deeper. One time a church had a clock on the wall which would not keep accurate time. So a man put a sign under the clock which read, "Don't blame the hands. The trouble lies deeper." What many call worldliness is just the hands of the clock; the real trouble lies deeper.

The world is alienated or separated from God. God's ways are not in their thoughts. The worldly person is a self-centered person. He allows self-interest to act as the governing force in his plans and activities. Psalm 10:4,5 states, ***"The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts. His ways are always grievous; thy judgments are far above out of his sight: as for all his enemies, he puffeth at them."***

Worldliness is loving what pleases one's own desires, rather than loving what God's desires. Richard Wolff gives an excellent description of worldliness when he says,

"The world is human nature sacrificing the spiritual to the material, the future to the present, the unseen and the eternal to that which touches the senses and perishes with time. The world is a mighty flood of thoughts, feelings, principles, of action, conventional prejudices, dislikes, attachments, which have been gathering around human life for ages, impregnating it, impelling it, molding it, degrading it." (Wolff, *James*, p. 68).

Worldliness produces the spirit of competition, and competition leads to personal conflict. James lists three areas of conflict. They are: conflict with others (v. 4:1b); conflict with oneself (vs. 1b-3); and conflict with God (vs. 4-6).

I. CONFLICT WITH OTHERS - v. 1b

“From whence come wars and fightings among you?”

Wars and fighting refers to conflicts among or between the people in the church. This is the same as discord in the form of quarrels and feuds. The plural form of both words indicates the conflicts were chronic and ongoing, rather than occasional. These disputes could have taken the form of arguments and controversies between teachers and factions in the churches, or it could have been over personal influence or business matters involving money as seen in 4:13-17 and 5:1-6. They were like wrestlers struggling to get the upper hand over their opponent.

It is a serious thing to be a troublemaker in the church, which is God’s family. One of the sins which God hates is that of sowing ***“discord among brethren”*** (Proverbs 6:19). David states in Psalm 133:1, ***“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”*** Remember that selfish desires created problems among the apostles as they disputed over who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

James lists four kinds of conflicts among these the church members.

1. Church Conflicts - (1:19, 20; 3:13-16; 4:1)

Apparently, several desired after the more honorable positions in the church (3:1). When they studied the Word, the result was not edification, but strife and arguments. Selfish ambition ruled their meetings rather than spiritual submission. Each person thought that their views were the only right ones.

2. Class Conflicts - (2:1-9, 15, 16)

Here we see the age old rivalry between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. The rich are honored and the poor are disgraced. When externals, such as clothing and economic well-being, become a basis of church fellowship, you may be assured that worldliness is operating in the church.

3. Personal Conflicts - (4:11, 12)

Here they are speaking evil or slandering one another behind their backs. Christians are to **“speak the truth in love”** (Ephesians 4:15), not to speak evil in the spirit of rivalry and revenge. If you have something personally against your brother, go to him personally and try to restore his fellowship. Follow the pattern in Matthew 18:15-19 and Galatians 6:1,2.

4. Employment Conflicts - (5:1-6)

Here the conflict is between management and labor. In this case it is the rich business man who is abusing the laborers. The laborers do not get paid their wages or else they don't get a fair wage. The cause is rooted in self-greed whereby one's gain is at the expense of the other.

II. CONFLICT WITHIN ONESELF - vs 1b-3

“come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”

James gives the answer to his own question as to why we have conflicts with others. It is due to the fact that friendship with the world not only creates conflict with other people, it creates conflict within the person himself, **“your lusts that war in your members.”**

Warren Wiersbe observes that:

“People who are at war with themselves because of selfish desires are always unhappy people. They never enjoy life. Instead of being thankful for the blessings they do have, they complain about the blessings they do not have. They cannot get along with other people because they are always envying others for what they have or do. They are always looking for that ‘magic something’ that will change their lives, when the problem is within their own hearts.” (Wiersbe, *Bible Expositions Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 368).

One does not have to look far to see the evidence of internal conflicts in the everyday lives of people. John MacArthur points this out when he says,

“The evidences of internal conflict are legion in society today. The proliferation of psychologists and psychiatrists, counselors, and therapists of all sorts; clinics for the treatment of a host of emotional and psychological disorders; the increased problems of drug addiction, domestic violence and abuse, dreadful crimes, alcoholism, and of suicides give abundance evidence that personal disorders have reached a crises point. The increase of impatience, frustration, anger, and hostility is not only seen in street crime, but vividly portrayed on modern highways, where drivers use obscene gestures, dangerous acts of intimidation, and sometimes even gunfire to vent their displeasure at what another driver does or fails to do.” (MacArthur, *James*, p. 186).

In verses 2 and 3, James lists the kinds of desires which are at war within the soul of the worldly man. David Jeremiah categorized them under four headings, which are: (1) Unsatisfied pleasure; (2) Uncontrolled passion; (3) Untapped potential; (4) Unanswered prayer. (Jeremiah, *Turning Toward Integrity Study Guide*, pp. 79, 80).

1. **Unsatisfied Pleasure - “You lust, and have not.”**

James tells us three times in this verse that those who had uncontrolled desires for pleasure were frustrated and unsatisfied people. This is because the desires always grow larger than what one has acquired. The people who have the most conflicts within are usually the people who have the most possessions.

2. **Uncontrolled Passion - “You kill (murder) and desire to have (covet), and cannot obtain.”**

People who live only to please themselves cause their own problems. Their desires war against the soul. I Peter 2:11 states, “**Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.**”

James was probably not referring to physical murder in his reference to “killing.” The Roman government would have captured and executed them as criminals. Jesus linked an attitude of hatred in the heart with murder (Matthew 5:21, 22). Hatred in the heart is a potential act of murder because it can lead to an actual act of murder. I often hear parents say of their child, who has been charged with murder, “Oh, it could not be my boy, I know him, and he could never do anything

like that.” Jeremiah would remind that parent, **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9). Uncontrolled passion prevents peace within the soul. Isaiah 57:20, 21 says, **“But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.”**

3. **Untapped Potential - “Ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”**

Self confidence leads to selfish desires which produce self-efforts. This erodes the practice of prayer. Why pray when you can get what you want for yourself. If there is some spiritual sensitivity present, the person may realize that his prayers are inappropriate. He realizes that what he desires is probably not what God desires, so he asks for nothing. Instead of turning to God as the giver of good and perfect gifts, he tries to satisfy his desires through his own schemes. Selfish desires destroy a prayer life.

4. **Unanswered Prayer - “You ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”**

The believer must not only pray, he must pray with the proper motive. He must consider whether his request will hallow God’s name, further God’s kingdom, and harmonize with God’s will (Matthew 6:9, 10). Simon Kistemaker observes that,

“God refuses to listen to men who eagerly pursue selfish pleasures. Greed is idolatry and that is an abomination in the sight of God: God does not listen to prayers that come from a heart with selfish motives. Covetousness and selfishness are insults to God.” (Kistemaker, James, p. 133).

III. CONFLICT WITH GOD - vs. 4-7

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

The root cause of all conflicts is rebellion against God. This is true of the internal conflicts within ourselves or the external conflicts with others. Sin is lawlessness. **“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.”** (1 John 3:4). And lawlessness is rebellion against God. Just how do we manifest our conflict with God? How do we declare war on God? By becoming friendly with God’s enemies. If we want to have the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, we must reject the attractive advances of three enemies which James lists. They are:

a. **The World** - v. 4

James compares friendship with the world to adultery. Friendship denotes an attitude of affection and kindly regard. To embrace the world’s friendship is to conform to its aims and means to achieve them. It is like a wife forsaking her vows to her faithful husband, and embracing the arms of an ungodly lover in an extra-marital affair. God is a jealous God who will not permit His bride to share her love with someone else.

b. **The Flesh** - vs. 1,5

By the flesh is meant that old nature that we inherited from Adam, that is given to sin. It is what James calls **“your lusts that are in your members.”** (v. 1) Living to please the flesh is to grieve the Holy Spirit which lives in us. God expects His bride to keep her vows “till death do us part.”

c. **The Devil** - vs. 6,7

The devil’s great sins are pride and dominion. It is the national religion of the kingdom of hell. Jesus’ great righteousness is humility and service. It is the national religion of the kingdom of heaven. God wants us to depend on His grace. The Devil wants us to depend on ourselves. God gives grace to the humble and meek. He resists the proud, that is He sets Himself against them like an army engaged to battle the enemy. To resist the Devil is to resist the spirit of pride and humbly depend on God’s grace. In doing so, the Devil will flee. He hates humility!

James now lists nine commands or imperatives in the Greek, which if humbly sought out after through depending on God's grace, will help resolve our conflicts and restore to us a life of peace and harmony with God, others, and ourselves. We can only list them in passing. The following principles are taken from David Jeremiah's book on James, entitled *Turning Toward Integrity*.

IV. PEACEFUL PRINCIPLES FOR THE CURE OF WORLDLY CONFLICTS - vs. 7-12.

Relinquish Control of Your Life - v. 7a ***“Submit yourselves therefore to God.”***

Resist the Devil - v. 7b ***“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”***

Restore Worship To a Priority - v. 8a ***“Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you.”***

Renounce Sinful Actions - v. 8b ***“Cleanse your hands, ye sinners.”***

Reject Sinful Attitudes - v. 8c ***“Purify your hearts, you double minded.”***

React to Sin with Sorrow - v. 9a ***“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep.”***

Refrain From a Frivolous Attitude Toward Evil - v. 9b ***“Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.”***

Respond Humbly to Success - v. 10 ***“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”***

Refuse to Slander Your Brother - vs. 11, 12 ***“Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?”***

If you ask how can I, a sinner, do such things? ***“He giveth more grace.”*** (v. 6).