

Chapter Four

commentary

In chapter four James continues with the same theme and topic he has addressed in chapter three, namely, that quarrels, hatred, and slander should never characterize the true body of Messiah as manifested in the local assemblies that claim Him to be their Lord and Savior. He continues with the same issue but does so now with a call to “submission to God and putting to death the sinful flesh.”

In verses 1–12, the emphasis is upon a willing submission to God in one’s own spirit and thus a true desire to make life’s day-to-day decisions in accordance with God’s revealed will, that is, the truth as made clear in the Scriptures and enabled by the indwelling Spirit of God. Then, in the final section of the chapter, verses 13–17, he admonishes us in very practical ways to always make our plans with the will of God as our primary goal and motivation, recognizing that to live contrary to the will of God is not the life of a true believer.

Here is a general overview of the chapter.

- I. Submission to God in all of one’s life and inward desires (1–12)
 - A. That which hinders our submission to God
 - 1. Asking with wrong motives (1–3)
 - 2. Being friends with the world (4–6)
 - B. That which fosters submission to God
 - 1. Drawing near to Him (7–10)
 - 2. Stop judging your brother; God is the judge (11–12)
- II. Submission to God means accepting Him as the judge (13–17)
 - A. Viewing all aspects of life as ordained by God (13–15)
 - 1. Example: making life’s plans without recognizing that He is the giver of life and all things are ordained by Him (13–14)
 - 2. Rather, always have “if God wills” as the focus in making life’s plans. (15)
 - B. Living life without consideration that God is in control is (16–17)
 - 1. evil and arrogant boasting (16)
 - 2. to disregard what every believer knows to be true, and is therefore sin (17)

1 – What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

The NASB begins the verse with the phrase “What is the source...” which is a fair translation of the Greek which has Πόθεν (*pothen*) and carries the sense of “from where?” The Greek text actually repeats *pothen* again making the sentence: “From where are quarrels and from where are conflicts among you?” The repeating of the word might well indicate a heightened emphasis and passion in the “voice” of James. In response to such a passionate and probing question, one could imagine that there were those within the communities to which James sent his epistle, communities that had experienced division among themselves, who, upon hearing or reading these words would immediately be tempted to point fingers at each other. “Our quarrels and conflicts and the division it has caused was your fault—you’re the one who is to be blamed for the divisions among us!” “NO! It was you who caused all the trouble, not me!”

James uses the terms “quarrels and conflicts” to characterize the division that existed in some of the communities he is addressing. “Quarrels” translates the Greek πόλεμος (*polemos*) which most often carries the sense of a literal “war” or “battle”¹ and is used extensively in Revelation for the wars and combat which will characterize the end times.² In non-biblical Greek literature, *polemos* could also be used figuratively to indicate “a state of hostility/antagonism, strife, conflict, quarrel”³ as James uses it in our text. Still, the use of the word by James seems to indicate not just common disagreements, but the kind of differences in which the parties refused to be reconciled and that therefore ended up in dividing away from each other.

The Greek word translated in the NASB as “conflicts” (μάχη, *maxē*), however, is only found three other times in the Apostolic Scriptures⁴ and always of “battles fought without physical weapons,” that is, battles brought about by strife between individuals over disagreements and the inability to find common ground. In such “conflicts” the weapons utilized are one’s tongue and words.

... *Is not the source your pleasures* – But if we can envision the conflicts James addresses as being fomented by each side blaming the other, it

1 cf. Matt 24:6; Mark 13:7; Luke 14:31; 21:9; 1Cor 14:8; Heb 11:34.

2 Rev 9:7, 9; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 19:19; 20:8.

3 BDAG, “πόλεμος,” p. 844.

4 2 Cor 7:5; 2 Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9.

is clear that James offers a different answer to the rhetorical question with which he opened. He asks what the source of such “battles” and “conflicts” might be and he answers by stating that the source is “your pleasures that wage war in your members.” The Greek word translated “pleasures” is ἡδονή (*hēdonē*), used again in v. 3 of our chapter, and only three other times in the Apostolic Scriptures.¹ In these three times where the word is found outside of the Epistle of James, it always carries the sense of “sinful pleasures.”

The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. (Lk 8:14)

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Tit 3:3)

But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; (2Pet 2:12–14)

James, then, in using these terms, is pointing out that the true source of “wars” and “conflicts” which disrupts the unity which should characterize the assembly of believers, is nothing less than the fruit of the sinful nature allowed to prevail and to gain victory when it should constantly be put to death.

And what is the primary “desire” that foments the quarrels and conflicts which result in division within the believing community? It is, in short, selfishness. Being self-centered means considering oneself as more important than others and that one’s own thoughts, aspirations, and designs are right and those who may disagree are wrong. It is the core attribute of the sinful nature, that is, self-centeredness which results in pride and an arrogant disposition. Such is the opposite of humility which is to characterize the true believer in Yeshua.

¹ Lk 8:14; Titus 3:3; 2Pet 2:13.

Yeshua identified the traits of the unregenerate person this way:

And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man. (Mk 7:20–23)

Likewise, in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians he describes the sinful nature as contrasted by the fruit of the Spirit, that which is to increasingly characterize the believer in Yeshua.

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Messiah Yeshua have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:19–24)

...that wage war in your members? – Here James reminds us in clear and unmistakable language that as believers in Yeshua, we nonetheless retain the sinful nature and must therefore recognize that a war continues and must be engaged if the battle is to be won. We, however, who are true believers in Yeshua, have the sure and firm promise that our own victory over sin is certain, and the seal that we are indeed to be victorious is that we are even now progressing more and more in subduing the sinful nature and yielding our thoughts, words, actions, and plans to the Lord, seeking to honor Him in all aspects of our lives. Wherein we fail and sin, we seek repentance and forgiveness, as well as strength to overcome and be victorious in the future. And the indwelling Spirit Himself continues to strengthen every believer in their desire and ability to live more and more to honor the One Who has redeemed them.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until [with a view to] the day of Messiah Yeshua. (Phil 1:6)

2 – You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.

It is important to recognize the structure of this verse, for if the lines are parallel (as they seem clearly to be), then this will aid in our understanding the meaning James intended. We can see the parallelism this way:

- (A¹) You lust and do not have;
- (B¹) So you commit murder.
- (A²) You are envious and cannot obtain;
- (B²) So you fight and quarrel
- (C) You do not have because you do not ask.

You lust and do not have – The first description of those who are fomenting dissension and division within the community is that they are given to “lust” (ἐπιθυμέω, *epithumeō*), which is the word *thumeomai*, “to have a strong desire for something” made even stronger by the addition of the preposition *epi*. Thus the NASB uses the English word “lust” to indicate the heightened emphasis of the “desire” being described. It is a desire that will stop at nothing to obtain what it wants.

In our context, what is that which is “greatly desired” but is not yet obtained? It is a position of prestige, power, authority within the community which the person or persons have not yet been given. It is seeking to obtain the recognition by others that those desiring a place of prominence should be given it.

...so you commit murder. – Here it is difficult to know exactly what James intends us to understand by the use of “murder” (φονεύω, *phoneuō*), the verb that regularly carries the sense of physically taking someone’s life. Some of the commentators, both ancient and modern, who find our text too difficult to accept as original, follow Erasmus who suggested that φονεύω, “to murder” be emended to φθονέω, “to be envious, to be jealous.” However, there is no manuscript evidence to support such a reading and it should therefore not be considered.

We must see in the words of James here that which is clearly taught in the Scriptures, that murder may surely begin with the sin of envy, which fuels anger and may lead to murder. Therefore lusting ought to be viewed for what it really is—the first step toward murder. We well remember that it was envy that first entered the heart of Cain, which brought forth anger which eventuated in murdering his brother Abel.

Still, it is also evident that sometimes the Scriptures use a sense of “murder” in a figurative way to describe character assassination. Jeremiah speaks of the tongue as a sword:

Then they said, “Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah. Surely the law is not going to be lost to the priest, nor counsel to the sage, nor the divine word to the prophet! Come on and let us strike at him with our tongue, and let us give no heed to any of his words. (Jer 18:18)

Likewise, Yeshua links the commandment, “You shall not murder” with anger against one’s brother which leads to describing him with words of hatred.

You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (Matt 5:21–22)

This fits the parallelism of our verse well, that while James is not in any way diminishing the severity of “murder,” he is showing us that the anger that leads to slandering another person and thus seeking to assassinate his character, is the same kind of anger that leads people to commit physical murder as well. Thus, once again, James emphasizes the grave sin of engaging in *lashon hara*, slander and gossip.

...*You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel* – When “lust” is not fulfilled, it turns to envy which is never satisfied. In the context of what was happening in some of the assemblies to which James’ epistle was being sent, those who were seeking to gain positions of authority and to be in control resorted to fighting and quarreling because they had not obtained what they desired.

But it is obvious that such activity not only fails to obtain what is desired. It rather defeats the greater purpose of the community as well, which is to honor the very Lord Who promised to build His *ekklesia*, even defeating the enemy Satan himself. (Matt 16:18)

You do not have because you do not ask. – Here in a short sentence, James gives us the crux of the issue. Those who were seeking to obtain their desired positions and influence to fulfill their own lusts for power have failed to obtain what they want because they did not submit

themselves to the very Lord they professed to serve, and failed to live out the truth that God Himself is the One Who gives to each of His own that which He has ordained for them. And this includes the plan He has for each of His children to accomplish the work He has given them to do, even equipping them for that work so that as they rely upon Him, they are successful in their service for the Lord.

What is more, failing to seek the Lord to supply one's needs and desires is tantamount to denying that He is the source of all that is good. To presume that one is able, on his own strength and ability, to obtain what is right and good, is in essence to deny that God is the sovereign of the universe and that He is the source of all blessings including equipping each of His children to complete the work He has given them to do. James' emphasis is that self-centeredness is a slippery slope, and if left unchecked, can end in denying the very God one claims to serve.