

Submit to God in Love

January 13 • Lesson 7

Bible Background • JAMES 4:1–10

Printed Text • JAMES 4:1–10 | Devotional Reading • PROVERBS 3:27–35

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: RECOGNIZE how worldly desires create conflicts; REPENT of the ways we caused unnecessary conflict with others; and DEVELOP ways to seek God in humble submission.

In Focus

When her mother opened the door to her bedroom, six-year-old Sarah waved her glittery wand and demanded, “Bow down to me, peasant! You are beneath me!” Her mother, Pam, gently responded, “Sarah, we don’t talk like that in this house.” “I know, Mommy, but it looks so cool on Spell Sisters! I just had to try it,” she explained. Her mother’s face fell with even more disappointment. Immediately, the little girl realized that without thinking she had confessed her huge secret to her mother. She had been secretly watching a forbidden TV show during her tablet time. Pam had forbade Sarah to watch Spell Sisters, a show for teenagers that she feared would lead to inappropriate actions like this. Her daughter was too young and impressionable. She wanted to protect her from bad things and people. Pam patiently explained to Sarah that thoughts and words have power so we have to watch what we allow to influence us. “That’s one of the reasons we read the Bible, and attend church every week,” Pam said carefully. “These are activities that help us think about God’s will and help us stop doing or saying things we shouldn’t.” Sarah understood. As a consequence of her disobedience, Sarah was not allowed tablet time until trust was restored.

Sarah was influenced by the TV show to say and do things that she shouldn’t. How can we use God’s Word to refresh our thoughts, words, and actions?

Keep in Mind

“Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world” (James 4:8, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Lust hedone (Gk.) — Passion or desire for pleasure.

B. Submit hupotasso (Gk.) — Obey God in humility.

Say It Correctly

none

KJV

KJV James 4:1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

2 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.

3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

4 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.

5 Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

6 But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

NLT

James 4:1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you?

2 You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.

3 And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

4 You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.

5 Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him.

6 And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

7 So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

9 Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy.

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

The People, Places, and Times

Desire. Often the word is used to express dangerous passions growing out of one's erroneous evaluation of the world and its pleasures. Scripture reveals that the desires that drive human beings are deeply rooted in our sinful human nature. Speaking of our days before we decided to follow Christ, Paul says we were "following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature," which made us "subject to God's anger" (from Ephesians 2:3, NLT). He also encouraged believers, "Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires." (Romans 6:12, NLT). Driven by these passions, people easily fall into sin.

Background

The book of James is written by James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. It was most likely written to Jewish Christians meeting in house churches outside of Palestine. James writes his letter with a focus on the faith of the believer and instructs believers on how to live out that faith. This faith should be expressed in one's lifestyle. The message of the book of James is that once individuals come to faith in Jesus, their lives, their thoughts, and their desires should all be oriented toward what pleases the Lord. Faith and right action should complement one another in the life of the believer.

At-A-Glance

1. Destructive Desire (James 4:1–3)
2. Faithful Fulfillment (vv. 4–5)
3. Pure Pursuit (vv. 6–10)

In Depth

1. Destructive Desire (James 4:1–3)

While Christians should be characterized by brotherly love, James is addressing a church that was hostile and divided. He begins by considering the cause of the wars and disputes that had arisen. The hostility had arisen from the evil desires within, specifically, desires for one's own pleasure.

The people turned to fighting and waging war to satisfy their own desires and ambitions. They did not turn to God to ask for what they desired. They sought to obtain their desires by their own means. Any petition to God was rooted in hedonism and a desire for pleasure or position.

How can you ensure that your interactions with others arise from pure motives?

2. Faithful Fulfillment (vv. 4–5)

After coming to faith, believers should abandon their old worldview. We should let go of the negative values, beliefs, and ways of thinking we held before becoming followers of Christ. We cannot hold on to both. When we accept Christ, we should allow Him to reshape us. To resist this process is to remain friends with the world. James notes that whoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.

God does not want to compete with the world for our affections. God has put His Spirit within us, and He wants us to be faithful to Him alone. God's Spirit "yearns jealously" for our full attention and affection. We cannot give faithful service to God and the world. God demands that we are faithful to Him first and foremost.

Reflect on the areas where you invest your time, talent, and treasure. Do they reflect love for God or for the world?

3. Pure Pursuit (vv. 6–10)

James offers the solution for the hostility and hedonism that plagued the church: submission to God. We are to humbly and purely submit our desires and ourselves to God. Submission to God should be the believer's first priority. We must submit to His wishes and standards. When we draw near to God in humble submission, God draws near to us. God's love for us is immeasurable. When we recognize our need for Him and draw closer to Him, God draws near to us. Humble submission is what God desires (Micah 6:8). James urges readers to humble themselves before the Lord and to "cleanse your hands," which refers to the ceremonial purification worship rites of priests in the Old Testament (James 4:8). It was symbolic of turning from sin. He also urges readers to purify their hearts, symbolizing an inward purification as well. James instructs readers to show genuine sorrow and remorse for sinful lifestyles.

Believers must submit themselves to God. The act of submitting yourself to God is paired with resisting the devil. When we do so, the enemy flees from us and we triumph over temptation.

James writes that God opposes the proud, but exalts those who humble themselves before Him. What have you done to draw near to God recently?

Search the Scriptures

1. James writes that to be friends with the world is to be an enemy of God. What does it mean to engage the world but not love worldliness?
2. James encourages us to humble ourselves before the Lord. In times past, people frequently did this by fasting, often with sackcloth and ashes. What does humbling ourselves before the Lord look like today?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Tell of a time when your media- or social media-influenced thoughts or words led you to a compromising situation. What does Scripture say about the importance of those thoughts and actions?
2. Give both a biblical and modern example of submission to God. How does God reward true submission throughout the Bible? Give examples.

Liberating Lesson

When we look at the conflicts in our world, whether disputes among our neighbors or wars between nations, the motive is often meeting selfish desires at the expense of others. As believers we must be attentive to not satisfy ourselves in ways that marginalize, take advantage of, or harm others. We must remain wholly committed to God, yet also engage the broken world around us. God cares for the lost and He expects us to show His love to the world. This has a direct impact on how we treat others—believers and unbelievers. Let the love of God lead you as you interact with others. Guard against conflict arising from inner desires and ambitions. However, we must take care to make sure that God remains the center of our affection. We cannot allow worldly pleasures and desires to draw us away from God or cause conflict with one another. We must resist the devil, draw near to God, and submit to God every day of our lives, choosing to reflect Christ in intentions and actions.

Application for Activation

One of the most important things a believer can do is draw close to God. Set aside some time in the next seven days to spend with God. Pour your heart out to Him and listen for what He has for you. God also expects us to be loyal to Him alone. While we must interact with the world, we must also remain wholly faithful to the Lord. We must remain in constant contact with Him through His Word and prayer. As you pray, examine the motives behind your desires and be sure that they align with the heart of God. Finally, submit yourself to God. Submit your thoughts and your ways to Him. Let your interactions with others be motivated with the pure motive of God's love.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

James 4:1–10

4:1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

In this passage, James is addressing the community as a whole, not individuals. This is a more detailed explanation of the principle mentioned previously that confusion and disorder result from envy and strife (3:16). He asks the believers to identify the origin of wars (polemos, POH-leh-moce) and fightings (mache, MAH-khay) among them. These words can be used to describe conflict between both individuals and between nations. The phrase “wars and fightings” can mean heated verbal arguments and serious armed struggle. Paul told Titus, to “avoid...strivings [mache] about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain” (Titus 3:9). Certainly some things are worth fighting for, or at least defending. However, the struggle must be done in a God-honoring way.

Unrighteous attitudes come from lust (hedone, hay-doh-NAY), which can be translated as “passion.” This word is not necessarily negative because it can also be translated as “pleasure.” But in the New Testament it is always used negatively (Luke 8:14; Titus 2:3; 2 Peter 2:13). James continues the military image to suggest that lusts or passions are waging wars within individuals. There is a battle, for example, between the desires of the body and the desires of the spirit. Peter alludes to this type of conflict: “Abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (from 1 Peter 2:11). Paul also is plagued with this type of internal conflict: “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:23).

2 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. 3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

The first part of this verse explains the implications of frustrated desire. James says the source of these conflicts is lust or desire for something. When such desires are unfulfilled, people commit murder. Again, when a person desires something and cannot get it, fighting and war could result. This pattern of unfulfilled and unchecked desires is present in the New Testament. Envy led certain Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus, and Pilate knew this (Mark 15:10). In the case of Jesus, it led to His death. James was warning the believers that if they continued in this manner, their unfulfilled desires could lead to killings. His question already tells us that there have been wars and fighting among them (v. 1). Even today, envy and unfulfilled desires are behind many personal conflicts and national war.

James gives two reasons why the believers do not have what they want. The first is simple: They do not have because they do not ask. The second reason is connected to the first; when they ask, they do not receive because they ask wrongly. James then explains what it means to ask wrongly: They ask in order to satisfy their lusts. These believers are

still operating within the realm that created their problems in the first place, namely, their lusts. To ask only to satisfy one's selfish desire is just as much of a problem as not asking at all; both are feeding our lust and causing conflict. James contrasts their behavior with the principle that Jesus used in prayer, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (from Matthew 7:7). If what we ask is within God's will, we can be confident that He listens to us (1 John 5:14).

4 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.

The phrase "ye adulterers and adulteresses" is one word in Greek, moichalides (moy-kah- LIH-dess), which means adulteresses, not adulterers. Why does James use this feminine term to describe the believers? In the following verses, James quotes heavily from the Old Testament. His use of the term "adulteresses" picks up the imagery of the relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament. The relationship between God and Israel is sometimes referred to as a marriage (Isaiah 54:4–6; Jeremiah 2:2). Israel's disobedience is considered "spiritual adultery." The prophet Hosea uses this language profusely (Hosea 2:5, 7, 16, 20). Jesus also used this terminology to describe the Israelites when He calls them "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:39). James is justified to call the believers adulteresses because they were developing intimacy with the world.

James reiterates a point that we cannot serve God and the world at the same time. James' strong language and position are based on his conviction that the believers' confession must match their lifestyle. They cannot be double-minded. James is making the point that to be intimate with the world is a betrayal of God. We cannot authentically proclaim that God is the only one who satisfies us and then seek satisfaction from the world.

5 Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

The "spirit" (Gk. pneuma, puh-NEW-mah) that dwells in us could be a reference to the Holy Spirit who dwells in born-again believers (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16). It could also be a reference to the breath of God that is in all human beings right from creation, which is the human spirit. Thus, James could be appealing to the believers that God owns them either by virtue of creation or by virtue of their new life in Christ. The implication is that the Spirit dwelling in believers in Jesus Christ should not be united to the world, but be faithful to Christ.

6 But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

The first part of verse 6 is a quotation of Proverbs 4:34, and the second part is similar to 1 Peter 5:5–9. In fact, a comparison of James 4:6–9 and 1 Peter 5:5–9 shows that the two passages share many exhortations. It seems that the suggestion here is not new to the believers. James is reinforcing the idea that he is not giving a new commandment, but standing in the tradition of giving wisdom to interpret what the Scripture already said. God is gracious to His children, and He gives them grace to live for Him when they recognize they need God and submit to His will rather than their own.

However, God resists the proud who live in sin by earthly wisdom. Those who believe they are self-sufficient and do not need God or are "self-made" are proud in their own eyes. This is a common theme in the Old Testament (Psalm 18:27; Zephaniah 3:11–12).

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. 9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

Verses 7–10 are a series of commands. These commands call believers to discard the habits of the old life and to practice these new ones. James recognizes the danger of the devil and calls for the believers to resist him. Resisting the devil is crucial because his primary purpose is to do everything he can to ruin believers' lives. This resistance is paired in the following verse with drawing close to God.

These verses describe the procedure of drawing near to God. The first step is repentance. This is signified by the cleansing of hands (an external action) and the purification of hearts (an internal action). James calls the people who need cleansing double-minded. Previously James had called these people unstable (1:8), but it also carries the image of these believers who want to be a friend of God and a friend of the world, too (4:4). This theme of drawing near to God in worship with clean hands and hearts is an Old Testament concept.

King David said clean hands and a pure heart were necessary for those who would minister before the Lord (Psalm 24:3–4).

James also calls the believers to be remorseful and mourn over their sins. This is similar to the prophetic language of calling the Israelites back to God. The Lord called the Children of Israel back to Himself through the prophet Joel because the Day of the Lord was near. He says, “Turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments” (from Joel 2:12–13). Deep sorrow and repentance over our sins is the appropriate response to sinning. Believers can sometimes fall into carelessness about sin, taking it lightly because of Christ’s forgiveness. This forgetfulness, however, is not the real joy and peace God wants His children to have. True joy comes from genuine repentance before God and knowledge of having peace with God through Jesus Christ.

10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

This is the last in a series of commands that James gives. Humility before God is to recognize our true state as human beings. God is God; we are not. We are poor, wretched, and needy compared to God’s holiness. Many preachers have said, “True humility isn’t to think less of yourself, but to think of yourself less.” It is living with the mindset that puts God at the center of your life in thought and action. It is recognizing our deep constant need for God regardless of what we have. This state of humility is best exemplified in the parable Jesus told of the two people who came to pray in the Temple (Luke 18:10–14). One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The tax collector recognized his spiritual poverty before God and asked for mercy. Jesus concluded, “everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased [humbled]; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (from v. 14). Deep humility in the Christian life is synonymous with total dependence on God.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

**One Teacher, Many Students
(Matthew 23:1–11)**

TUESDAY

**Members Depend on Each Other
(1 Corinthians 12:19–26)**

WEDNESDAY

**Solve Conflicts One to One
(Matthew 5:21–26)**

THURSDAY

**Longing for God's Help
(Psalm 42)**

FRIDAY

**Walk in Newness of Life
(Romans 6:1–14)**

SATURDAY

**Boasting an Insult to God
(James 4:13–7)**

SUNDAY

**Godly Approach to Worldliness
(James 4:1–10)**