

SESSION 5

Faith on Display in Facing the Enemy



QUESTION 1:

What's something you commonly fought over as kids?

THE POINT

You can stand triumphantly in Christ over sin, the world, and Satan.

THE PASSAGE

James 4:1-10

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The leaders in the church's preschool departments do far more than provide our grandchildren a safe place to play while we learn and worship. They also teach. Under the preschool teachers' care, our grandchildren learn that God created the world and is watching over them. They learn that God loves them, and the church is a place where they are loved and cared for. They also learn the importance of good relationships.

One minute, two children will be sitting next to one another, happily playing with their toys. In the next minute, one of them will try to take the other's toy away. If she does not get her way, she is fully prepared to escalate the tug-of-war into an all-out battle. Our teachers use that moment to teach important lessons about sharing, how to be kind to one another, and proper ways to resolve differences.

Preschoolers surely need to learn these lessons, but they are not alone. Senior adults could use the same lessons our preschool teachers are teaching every week. James showed us that fights and quarrels are deeply rooted in our sinful human nature.

James 4:1-3

1 What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from your passions that wage war within you?

2 You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask.

3 You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Conflict is everywhere. It happens on a global, national, and local scale. We experience conflict at work, in our communities, in our homes, and in our churches. Sadly, conflict can happen even when the church is thriving. Years ago, Calvary Church held a week-long revival meeting, and God poured out His blessings. From miles around, people came. The evangelistic services were so effective that the church stretched the meeting to two weeks—and then to three.

When Calvary's pastor resigned later, the deacons asked the evangelist who preached the revival meeting to consider becoming their next pastor. Since everyone had responded positively when he was a guest speaker, they thought he would make a great pastor. The evangelist initially resisted, but the deacons persisted. The evangelist eventually agreed to be the next pastor.

In the beginning it looked like a good decision, and the church grew like a wildfire under his leadership. People packed the building from as far away as seventy-five miles—unbelievable for a small country church. Everybody was happy, right?

Not exactly. Some of the long-time church members did not like the growth and began to hold back their tithes. For a while, the conflict stayed underground, but it soon bubbled to the surface when one of the ringleaders of the resistance stood up in a business meeting and said, "This church is full of people who

don't belong here. They don't live here, they don't know us, they don't belong. Now it's time for them to go." Then she made a motion to fire the pastor and for the clerk to purge everyone who lived outside the city limits from the church membership rolls.¹

Conflict in church seems out of place. We expect believers to act in a Christlike manner, but even those who read the Bible and sing worshipful songs can succumb to self-centered motives. The reason is because everyone—even every believer—has a sinful nature that he or she must battle every day. Our sinful nature desires something someone else has that we do not have, and it becomes covetousness. This powerful desire to obtain what others have increases frustration, dissatisfaction, and disappointment, becoming a deep-seeded inner conflict. We long for more, and when we do not get it, the inner turmoil increases. With time, our inner conflict erupts and escalates so that others are affected.

James paired two words with similar meanings—"wars and fights"—to describe this eruption. This combination captures the full range of conflict intensities from bitter disagreements to a fully armed battle. Whether the conflict is subtle or extreme, it has the same source: our self-centered passions and desires. Our self-centered, sinful nature keeps us in a state of perpetual conflict. We take matters into our own hands instead of turning to God for what we need.

The ultimate source of the problem is neither our inner turmoil nor our visible conflict with others; rather, it is the conflict we are having with God. If we trusted God, we would ask Him for what we really need, and we would contentedly trust Him for what He provides. But we don't come to God, and because we do not ask, we have inner conflict that becomes conflict with others. To break this endless cycle, we must learn to trust God enough to ask Him for what we need.

God, who will supply wisdom to those who ask (Jas.1:5), will also provide for our needs when we ask. Just as our request for wisdom must be accompanied with an unwavering faith (1:6-8),

the appeal for our needs must be accompanied with pure motives. In other words, God does not give us things simply because we want and covet them. If our requests flow out of our self-centered sinful nature, He says no. God will only answer in a way that honors Him. “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it *so that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (John 14:13, emphasis added).

QUESTION 2:

Where do you see the truth of these verses reflected in our culture?

James 4:4-5

4 You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God.

5 Or do you think it's without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely?

A materialistic and self-centered mindset is something we expect to see in the world, but not among those who follow Christ.

Covetousness—the powerful driving force to have what belongs to others—pulls us away from enjoying the sufficiency of Christ. When we refuse to rely on God, we are expressing hostility toward Him.

James used strong language to underscore the seriousness of the silent, incessant, destructive spirit of covetousness and the worldly mindset. Instead of calling his readers brothers and sisters, as had been his pattern in this letter, he now called them “adulterous people.” With this change in how he addressed his readers, James was shifting from a pastoral to a prophetic tone. When James

called his readers “adulterous,” he was using the same type of language the Jewish prophets used to confront the people about their spiritual unfaithfulness. Isaiah (Isa. 1:21), Jeremiah (Jer. 3:1-10), Ezekiel (Ezek. 16:23-43) and Hosea (Hos. 9:1) all referred to the unfaithful nations of Israel and Judah as adulterers. Like the prophets before him, James spoke directly and candidly to the people.

By using that phrase, James not only signaled how serious the issue is, but he also summarized the essence of covetousness—a desire that is not contained by godly boundaries. Like adultery, covetousness breaks trust. It breaks our trust with God as well as with His people. Covetousness and adultery share something else in common: they both impact the lives of innocent people. The conflicts caused by covetousness destroy others just as adulterous affairs hurt innocent people.

Sin converts healthy drives into destructive passions. These covetous passions are unregulated and never bring satisfaction. The insatiable desire for more never ends. Like cancer, covetousness destroys what is good and healthy around it and does not stop until everything is gone.

Aligned with Jesus’s teaching that “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24), James taught that covetous believers are not being faithful to God; their pursuit of worldly things “is hostility toward God.” Instead of depending on Him and trusting Him for what they need, they’ve sold out to materialism. Their inner struggle and dissatisfaction will only lead to further struggles: battles with others and with God. They have become “the enemy of God.” By contrast, look at Abraham. “Abraham believed God” and was willing to leave behind everything that was familiar to him; consequently, “he was called God’s friend” (Jas. 2:23).

While some might think they can flirt with the world and still be faithful to God, James dispelled that notion. There can be no harmless flirtation with the world. It is impossible to say to the world, “We’re just friends.” Such an attitude puts believers

in the category of spiritual adulterers. Thinking like the world and pursuing the things of the world will always pull us away from Christ.

QUESTION 3:

What does friendship with the world look like?

James 4:6-10

6 But he gives greater grace. Therefore he says: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

7 Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

9 Be miserable and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

We have hope! The hostility with God does not have to continue. James provided guidance on how to end the war and be a friend of God. The friendship restoration begins when God's people stop acting like He is their enemy and submit to His care and authority. God is never the problem; our sinful nature is. The solution is to stop submitting to the insatiable appetites of our sin nature and begin submitting to God by depending on Him for our needs.

Of course, that does not mean that temptation or difficulty ceases. Satan will not be happy when we stop submitting to our sinful nature. So, when we experience temptation and feel the onslaught of Satan, we are to resist him. We don't argue or debate; we "resist the devil." We don't even run from him. Scripture calls us to "flee" many things—sins such as sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18),

idolatry (10:14), envy, love of money, and a host of other sins (1 Tim. 6:4-11)—but James called us to stand our ground and resist the devil. When we do, he flees from us!

We draw near to God “with boldness” (Heb. 4:16), and when we do, he will draw near to us. While God resists the self-sufficient, arrogant, lofty person, He is gracious and kind to those who humble themselves before Him in prayer. When we pray, He draws near to us. He listens. He provides what we need.

QUESTION 4:

What does it look like to draw near to God?

There is an interesting relationship between prayer and humility. God has called His people to humble ourselves and pray (2 Chron. 7:14), but we often view those as two separate actions. However, they are inseparable. The very act of praying requires humility. When we pray, we are expressing our dependence on God, who is the only source for what we really need. Prayer is an admission that we cannot provide for ourselves; we require God’s intervention.

In humility we pray, and we repent of our sins. Earlier, James had reminded us that we cannot doubt and be double-minded when we pray and “expect to receive anything from the Lord” (Jas. 1:7-8); now he referred to double-mindedness in the sense of trying to live for both God and the things of the world. A heart of repentance and humility is needed when we pray, which is why James said, “Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” In this, James echoed the words of David, “Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps. 24:3-4).

After Nathan confronted him over his sin against God and Uriah the Hittite, David wrote a psalm of repentance (Ps. 51). Just as David did, we do more than admit that we have a sinful nature (v. 5); we also confess our sins before God (vv. 3-4). In full submission to God, we ask him to cleanse us (v. 7) and purify our

hearts (v. 10). David prayed this prayer with all humility (v. 17). God is faithful to answer our humble prayer (1 John 1:9), even as He did for David (Ps. 32).

With clean hands and a pure heart, we see our sinfulness with new clarity. In God's presence, His holiness contrasts with our sinfulness, and we experience the darkness of our hearts. We begin to weep. But thankfully, when we mourn over our sinfulness, we experience God's comfort (Matt. 5:4) as He draws near to us. He responds with His infinite grace. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

QUESTION 5:

What are specific actions we can take to resist the devil?

ENGAGE

What are two steps you can take this week to approach God more humbly in prayer?

What are two steps you can take to resist Satan from negatively affecting your relationship with God?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out the truths of this passage and stand triumphantly in Christ?

- ▶ **Confess.** If this passage has convicted you of self-centeredness, covetousness, or a worldly attitude, confess and repent. Use Psalm 51 as the structure for your prayer.
- ▶ **Retreat.** Spend half a day in prayer. Begin with confession and submission. Ask God to guide you in planning a course of action to avoid the temptation of materialism. Evaluate the effects of what you read or watch on encouraging a worldly mindset.
- ▶ **Clean house.** Take inventory of what you possess that reflects a worldly mindset or was purchased from a heart of materialism. This may need to be done with a spouse or family member, but consider removing those things from your life. Sell them if necessary and give the money to support mission work through your church.



END NOTES

1. Mark Tabb, "Killer Church Fight," *Leadership Journal*, (Fall 2001): 88-89.