

# James 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] James chapter 4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder.

You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is 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 that the scripture says, He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

[ 1 : 05 ] Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

Come now, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?

For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance.

All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James has previously spoken of the conflicts that arise in communities through jealousy and selfish ambition.

[ 2 : 08 ] And now in chapter 4 he develops this and other themes. Some communities are distinguished by factions and antagonisms. And James wants us to think about why this might be.

What is ultimately causing this? He traces it back to the passions that are at war within and gaining control over his hearers. The statements in verse 2 can be understood in different ways.

Maybe they are separate statements of the kind You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and quarrel. Or as the ESV puts it, which I think is right, You desire and do not have, so you murder.

You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. What he is doing, I think, is describing the same thing as he does in chapter 1 verse 15. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. The point that he is making is that this is the natural life cycle of desire. Sinful desires and passions, unarrested, lead to quarrels and fights.

[ 3 : 11 ] And those, when fully grown, lead to murder. This is similar to the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26 in the Sermon on the Mount. You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says, You fool, will be liable to the hell of fire.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and

then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The point that Jesus is making here is similar to the point that James makes. Desire has a life cycle, and you need to arrest it before it grows. We might also think here of the way that God challenges Cain when his face falls and he is angry as a result of the fact that his sacrifice has been rejected, while his brother Abel's has been accepted.

[ 4 : 29 ] Sin is crouching at the door, and unless he masters his anger and deals with that right away, it will become full grown, and it will become something that he cannot control. What underlies their frustrated desires?

They fail to ask properly. Even when they are praying, they are driven by their passions. Jesus has promised to answer requests in Matthew 7, verses 7-11.

Once again, we should observe the importance of the Sermon on the Mount for reading James.

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?

[ 5 : 28 ] God answers prayers, but he gives good gifts, not those things that merely feed our unruly desires. However, because of people's wayward desires, they are experiencing frustration of those desires, which are then being aggravated into conflicts.

James is a very perceptive observer of human nature, and he has a pastoral eye for such things.

He challenges his hearers for their misplaced or divided affections. They are adulterous, giving their hearts and favours to others, seemingly not appreciating that this sets them at enmity with God.

They are playing the harlot, as the Old Testament prophets describe Israel. By being friends of the world, being absorbed and preoccupied with earthly things, they are committing adultery against God.

God is a jealous God. The quotation in verse 5, the source of which is not entirely clear, could be read in a number of different ways. For instance, the spirit might be the human spirit, or it might be the Holy Spirit.

It might, as some have suggested, be a reference to the tendency of the human spirit that God has given to sinful jealousy, if it is not held back. The yearning may be that of the spirit, or it may be the yearning of God himself.

[ 6 : 39 ] I take this as a reference to the holy jealousy of God, spoken of in the Ten Commandments themselves. God is a jealous God, and his jealousy is expressed in the Holy Spirit that he has given us, the means by which we are united to Christ as his bride.

However, James argues, God gives more grace. He is a jealous God, but he gives the grace that we need. While the proud face resistance and rejection, the humble receive grace from God to sustain them, and to enable them to respond to God aright.

Verses 7-10 speak of the posture that we should take towards God. Recognising the waywardness, the fickleness, and the dividedness of our hearts, we should humbly draw near to God, seeking the grace that we need.

We should mourn our sins, we should resist the devil, and place ourselves beneath God's instruction and his hand. We must seek God to purify our divided hearts, so that we will seek him alone.

And as we humble ourselves and seek God, we may start to find that our prayers are being answered for our good, and our wayward desires that once so unsettled us are gradually being overcome by his grace.

[ 7 : 48 ] Once again, he gives a warning about speech and judgment in verses 11 and 12. This picks up themes of the beginning of chapter 3. It's almost reminiscent of some of Jesus' warnings about judgment in the Sermon on the Mount again.

Speaking against, as James speaks about it here, could refer to a number of different things, to slandering, to false accusations, to challenging of legitimate authority, and other such things.

He makes a peculiar and surprising claim. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. Similar issues were tackled by Jesus in Matthew chapter 7 verses 1 to 2.

Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. There are tasks of discernment which we are called to perform.

However, true judgment belongs to God alone, the one who assumes the status of a judge over his neighbour, in condemning him, usurps the place of the law, and also of God.

[ 8 : 53 ] In the process, that person ends up placing themselves over the law, and breaking the golden rule. True wisdom is very careful and humble in the task of discernment and judgment.

It recognises the place of God's judgment over it. It only judges as it stands under God as judge. James now moves to discuss the presumptuous arrogance of people who act without regard to God's providence.

Just as with judgment, there are clearly times when making plans is appropriate and necessary, but we must be entirely clear that we do so as frail creatures standing under the providence of God, without the control of or knowledge of the future that he possesses.

We are like a mist or a puff of smoke. This might be similar to the points that Ecclesiastes makes as he speaks about hebel or vapour, a word often translated vanity.

The idea of mist or vapour captures something of the transitory character of life and the way that it eludes our control. We should register the fact of God's providence in our speech, recognising that we stand under it.

[ 10 : 00 ] When we fail to do this, we are simply boasting in our arrogance in an evil manner. In many ways, this is the obverse of Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 6, verses 25 to 34, once again part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life?

And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat?

[ 11 : 04 ] Or what shall we drink? Or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents God's providence in response to the anxiety of the poor and the needy, who feel their lack of control over the future. In his epistle, James presents God's providence in response to the arrogance of the rich and the self-confident, who feel very much that they are in control of the future.

Whether we are anxious or arrogant, we should realise the providence of God and the way that it stands over all of our plans and concerns. Now that we as James' hearers know this to be the right thing, he wants us to know that if we fail to do it, we are sinning.

Once again, he is concerned that hearing is transformed into doing, that words are metabolised into actions. A question to consider.

[ 12 : 15 ] At the heart of much of James' teaching in this chapter is the importance of humbling ourselves before God. How would such humbling of ourselves relieve the conflicts, antagonisms, and aggravations with which the chapter begins?

