

# A Study in James

## The Tests of a Living Faith

James 4:1–5

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### Introduction

As we leave chapter 3, James purposely left the tension with the readers' misuse of the tongue and their failure to exercise godly wisdom unresolved. He hinted at a solution by describing the source and evidence of godly wisdom (3:17–18), but did not directly address the corrective. But before James identifies the solution, he adds to the tension by accusing his readers of having a worldly spirit.

### Test #6: A Living Faith and Godly Affections (4:1–12)

This next test follows a pattern similar to the previous one. James will highlight the need and importance of godly affections as the evidence of a living faith. As with the previous test, James begins by accusing his readers of failing the test. In other words, he is charging the readers with having their affections on this world and the things of this world, rather than on God and the things of God.

There are two sections in this passage. The first documents the specific problems the readers were having with worldliness (vv. 1–5). Following this, James offers a solution of repentance and renewed devotion to God (vv. 6–12). This also serves as the corrective for the previous test involving godly speech and conduct (3:1–18).

### The Problem of Worldliness (vv. 1–5)

In their hasty rush to become teachers, James's readers became embroiled in heated arguments that created conflicts. This same problem exists today. Oftentimes young and immature believers will race headlong into an argument trying to convince others of the correctness of their position. At times these issues may involve important theological matters. But all too often, these immature believers will find a soapbox issue and argue with other believers until they're blue in the face. James gets to the root of this issue and says that the ensuing conflicts are due to conflicting desires and misplaced affections.

## The Source of Their Conflicts (vv. 1–3)

Before James addresses the *real* problem, he first begins with the surface problem: conflict.

### *The Identification of the Source (v. 1)*

Recall that James ended chapter 3 by telling us that peace is the atmosphere in which godly, righteous conduct can flourish. Unfortunately, this situation among James's readers was not as peaceful as it should be. The opening question assumes that there was conflict among James's audience. The logical conclusion from this is that the readers were displaying a lack of godly wisdom.

James answers his own question rhetorically in verse 1b. Wars and fights *do* come from their desires for pleasure that war in their members. In essence, James is saying that the inward battle results in outward battles. The thing about battles is there is always someone trying to win. When you think about the inward battle, it is the pleasure-seeking desires inside that are trying to gain satisfaction at the expense of something else — righteousness and godliness. Verse 5 makes it clear that believers are in view here. As believers, we wrestle throughout our lives with divided loyalties. On one side we have a disposition toward godliness. On the other, we're disposed toward fulfilling the desires of the flesh and conforming to the world. James's desire is that we would mature with respect to this battle, reducing our double-mindedness and divided loyalties (cf. Rom 7; Gal 5).

### *Further Symptoms of Conflicts (vv. 2–3)*

Verses 2 and 3 are the evidence of the conflicts within these folks. The desires here are clearly sinful. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus equated lust with adultery (Matt 5:28) and hatred with murder (Matt 5:21–22). This is not to say that James is calling every believer a literal adulterer or murderer. The point is that they were acting lustfully and murderously.

In terms of lust, they covetously desired what was not theirs to have: the things of this world. Because of the close association with adultery, we can see the figurative parallel here with spiritual adultery. The Jews in particular were very familiar with this idea from the book of Hosea. They had lusted after other gods through idolatry, effectively making them spiritual adulterers. They had left the One true God who had

chosen them and delivered them. The same is true of believers today who cozy up with the world system and worldly things. Of course this does not eliminate the idea that a believer could commit literal adultery — having another person’s spouse. But the specific chastisement here is on lusting after the world. In terms of murder, these believers were acting murderously, or with hatred in their hearts. As with adultery, this hatred could also lead to literal murder if not kept in check.

The point of verse 2 is that these believers were seeking after the things they wanted but not making any progress. The reason is because they were seeking after sinful things. They knew it would be wrong to pray for evil things and so they didn’t pray at all. But even the few times they did pray, they were doing so with the wrong motives. Their desires still remained unfulfilled because they asked for worldly pleasures.

Sometimes we can ask for good things, like those who wanted to be teachers. But when asking we need to consider our motives. Did James’s readers want to become teachers to exercise their spiritual gifts and glorify God? Or were they seeking a pedestal and place of honor among the group? Likewise with material things: are we asking for things according to our *needs* so that we can serve Christ more fully? Or are we seeking after the next new “toy” or status symbol so that we can indulge in the things of the world?

#### The Underlying Problem (vv. 4–5)

James begins verse 4 with one of the most blistering accusations of believers in all the Bible! He calls them adulterers and adulteresses because they have committed spiritual adultery. The phrase “friendship with the world” is where we get the idea of worldliness. Friendship involves placing one’s affections on the things of this world rather than on the things of God. The problem is not that the church is in the world, but that the world is in the church — at least in its affections.

James doesn’t mince words here when he calls these believers “enemies of God.” The same term is used in Romans 5:10 to describe believers *prior* to their salvation. We were formerly immersed in the world system and enslaved to our own sinful desires. (James is not implying that you can lose your salvation. Notice it is the believer who is making himself God’s enemy, not God declaring the believer an enemy.) However, this is not the way true believers ought to live. We should be setting our affections on the things above! Notice also that it’s not only

*being* a friend of the world that is wrong. James is saying that *desiring* to be a friend of the world is also wrong!

James concludes his accusation by reminding us of God's jealousy. The fact that God is jealous should not conjure up images of sin in our minds. This kind of jealousy is completely righteous. We can see a parallel to this in the marriage relationship. A husband should *jealously* desire the affections of his wife. He alone is to be the recipient of her romance and love, and vice versa. And like a jealous husband, the Lord desires the affections of every believer because it is God who dwells in us. I understand the word "Spirit" in this verse to refer to the divine Holy Spirit, not the human spirit that each person possesses. What James is saying is that we need to seek after God alone because He earnestly desires our whole-hearted affections.

### **Conclusion**

There is a real spiritual battle going on within each of us. Every day there are conflicts that arise because of this struggle within us. This will continue to cause tension in our relationships with others as long as we leave these sinful desires unchecked. We need to recognize that the world system we see day to day is thoroughly evil. It is squarely at odds with the true and living God who wants to lay full claim on us. I can think of no other more fitting conclusion than Paul's words in Philippians 3:

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." ~Phil 3:12-14 (NKJV)

~AWB