

**The Path to Unity**  
**James 4:1–17**  
**March 12, 2023**

Earlier we read Philippians 2. When most of us think about Philippians 2, we *rightly* think of the rich truths about Christ’s person. Though He **existed in the form of God** (Phil 2:6), He **emptied Himself**—poured Himself out—by being **made in the likeness of men** (2:7). This is one of the premier passages concerning Jesus’s incarnation in the New Testament. We’ve taught it many times.

But we’ve not come *close* to exhausting it. And one reason we’ve not come close to exhausting it is because we’ve often extracted it from its context. The context of Philippians 2—including those truths about the Word becoming flesh—is the topic of church unity. Philippians 2:2: **make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose**. *That’s* what Paul instructs the church at Philippi to do. Then, he tells them *how* they might have this unity, in the next verse: **with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves** (2:3). So, unity *between* them, according to Philippians 2, demands humility *among* them. And once Paul’s given them instruction—be united in spirit—and then *how* that unity might be facilitated—by humility—he can’t help but glory in the One that did this already, *before* them, and *for* them. The Christ–hymn just comes spilling out of his pen. The One of inestimable honor—the glory of God embodied—humbled Himself.

Keeping that in mind, let’s move to James. As I said a couple weeks back, when I first began studying this book in more depth, I wasn’t so sure that the double–minded—or divided—person was as great of an emphasis as some writers maintained. And yet every week I’ve preached that concept has been emphasized in the text. This week is far from an exception. As far as division goes, James writes that there is a “waging war” within them (4:1). Two forces are colliding inside these believers. As evidence of this, they ask, but they ask with wrong motives (4:3). In other words, their tongue isn’t aligned with their heart. Further, they shift allegiances so much that James calls them “adulteresses” (4:4). Though they call Christ Lord (2:1), they also wish to be friends with the world (4:4). And if we missed all those hints about their “two–ness,” James eventually tells them, **purify your hearts, you double–minded** (4:8).

James has diagnosed what’s going on with these believers. He’s been showing them their test results for most of the letter. They’ve divided faith from works *because* they’re divided within.

But, finally, after multiple chapters of that diagnosis being spelled out, in *this* passage James gives something of a remedy. Our double–mindedness *can* be addressed by a particular posture. In fact, to a person with that posture, God gives grace. And *that* posture is the same one noted in Philippians 2: humility. In other words, as divided people, that which facilitates church unity *among* us also facilitates unity *within* us. But note first,

## 1. The Perils of Division

### a. Division’s essence and effects (vv. 1-3)

Verse 1: **What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?** Speaking of James’s propensity to diagnose, he asserts that the quarrels and the conflicts existing among them are symptoms of something deeper. There’s something *underneath* the visible division. In essence he’s asking, “From ‘where’ are the quarrels? From ‘where’ does this conflict come?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “From where” is repeated twice in the original for emphasis. See Chris Vlachos, *James*, EGGNT, 129.

His answer is in verse 2: **Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?** This sounds quasi–Pauline, right? Romans 7: **a law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind** (Rom. 7:23). It also sounds like Peter, in 1 Peter 2:11: **Beloved I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against your soul.** James agrees with the Apostles because the same Author inspired them all. Here he's making plain that the underlying cause of that which is visible are these pleasures within waging war. There's a fight *inside*. That's why there's conflict *outside*.

And it doesn't matter if you're an analytical person, or overly introspective, all of us should reckon with our sin in this way. We don't merely treat the symptoms, or what's visible. Instead we ask, "What's going on within me that led me to speak that way, or do that thing, or *not* do that thing I should've done?" When's the last time you honestly answered a question like that?

Why is there a fight within? Because there's division within. That's the essence of it. What are these pleasures waging war? Verse 2: **You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.** Is this notion of "lust" broader than what we typically think of? Yes. Though it seems to include that, it also describes desires or longings.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as James wrote in chapter 1, desires don't stay desires. **When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin** (1:15). In this case, lust wages war within us. And that desire has effects. If you don't get that which you desire or long for, you **commit murder**. Do we have evidence that someone in the church James wrote was murdered by another church member? No, we don't. Can we be reasonably sure that James had heard the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about anger being tantamount to murder? Yes, we can.

What other desires are waging war? Verse 2 goes on: **You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.** Had these Jewish Christians heard, **You shall not covet** (Ex. 20:17). Yes, of course. Yet, they were *still* envious. And they envied those that had what they couldn't obtain. And *that* desire waging war within them had effects too. They fought and quarreled.

So, if you're at odds with someone, could it be because you envy them? Maybe you've wondered why they get that recognition. Or why is their life *seemingly* easier? I work harder than they do. I've earned it more than they have. This division *within* believers—the waging war—can lead to division *among* believers.

James goes on in verse 2: **You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.** Tell me if this sounds familiar. Sometimes you know that God is the source of all good things, but you fail to ask Him for anything. That's Monday or Tuesday. Then on Wednesday you've seemed to make progress spiritually; so, you ask Him, but you ask for selfish reasons. Your prayer journal is roughly equivalent to, "My kingdom come. My will be done." If that's you, it's nothing new. James writes, v. 2, **You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.**

Our actions reflect what's going on within us. Our visible contradictions are a manifestation of our fractured affections. We love Christ. We treasure His word, until we don't.

Maybe one of your children—now or in the past—came to you asking a question your spouse had already answered. Toddlers know what it means to divide and conquer. Though Generals might've mastered this concept on the battlefield, sin came up with it. There are perils to this division within.

#### b. Division's essence and enemy (vv. 4–6)

If we're still unconvinced of the gravity of our ever–shifting allegiances, James writes verse 4: **You adulteresses.** Throughout the Old Testament, the Scriptures weave the theme that Yahweh is

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<sup>2</sup> Vlachos, 131.

Israel's husband.<sup>3</sup> Does it describe this as a thriving relationship? Not generally. Instead, Israel's role is repeatedly described as *unfaithful*. The first book that might come to mind is the book of Hosea, when God compares Israel's unfaithfulness to the life of the harlot (Hos. 1:2). And it's not only Hosea. Jeremiah wrote: **as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel** (Jer. 3:20). And it's not only the Old Testament. Jesus Himself called Israel **an evil and adulterous generation** (Matt. 12:39). So here in James 4 it's not unlikely that *this theme* is precisely what James intends to conjure up.<sup>4</sup> He's concerned about division within us. In marriage, two become one. Oneness is not intended to be "two-ness." And one of the starkest words/actions one might use to describe the functional dividing of this oneness is adultery.

James calls them adulteresses, and then continues to describe what he means, **do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?** By "friendship" he doesn't mean what Zuckerberg means; he means close association, mutual interest,<sup>5</sup> the sharing of all things in a profound unity.<sup>6</sup> That's what he means by "friendship." And by world he doesn't mean "earth," he means that system of thinking and living on earth which opposes Him. In verse 4, James doesn't leave us the option of befriending in profound unity that which opposes God. In essence, he's repeating His brother's instruction, **No one can serve two masters** (Luke 16:13).

So, if the world opposes God, and we befriend the world, that leads to the "therefore" of verse 4: **Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** The subject of that sentence makes plain the one at fault. No one else takes the fall for making you an enemy of God. The world didn't do it. James says, **whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.**<sup>7</sup>

Why does this division within—calling Christ Lord while wishing to befriend the world—make us an enemy of God? Because the Old Testament didn't *merely* tell us that Israel was unfaithful; it made plain that God was/is jealous. He loves His people enough that He longs for their pure, *unadulterated*, allegiance. He longs for this to such a degree that He opposes that which harms and divides them.

That's what verse 5 describes: **Or do you think that the Scripture speaks<sup>8</sup> to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"?** Whether this refers to the Lord's desire that His Holy Spirit dwell within us without rival, or it refers to our lower-case "s" spirit being fully submitted to Him—either way—the verse and the flow of the argument speak to His desire—His jealous desire—for whole-hearted allegiance within us.<sup>9</sup>

He opposes that which would divide our affections. And in the middle of verse 6 James pinpoints one of the chief issues waging war within us. It's opposite will be our theme for the second half of the passage. What is it that God opposes in verse 6? Pride.

Is there any sin listed in the first five verses that you couldn't trace back to this besetting sin? Quarrels, conflicts, lust, envy, prayerlessness? Is there any sin in the book of James that we couldn't trace back to "we know better than God"?

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 54 is one example.

<sup>4</sup> See Doug Moo, *James*, PNTC, 238.

<sup>5</sup> Vlachos, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Moo, 235. We heard from Drew Hunter yesterday that friendship is "a close relationship of truth and trust."

<sup>7</sup> James uses the Greek middle voice to make this clear. In the middle voice, the subject does something that boomerangs back and affects the subject.

<sup>8</sup> You say, "What passage is that?" There are two main answers. First, he could be summarizing the Old Testament theme of God's jealousy. See Moo, 240. Second, he could be referring in advance to the passage he quotes verbatim in verse 6 from Proverbs 3:34.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Plummer, *ESV Expository Commentary*, 269.

## 2. The Path to Unity

This sin of pride—like all others—divides us. But there’s good news: God opposes *both* that division *and* what causes it. And because He opposes that which wars against us, He provides a remedy. What is the answer to our double-mindedness, our “two-ness.” Verse 6: **But He gives a greater grace.** In the original, “greater” is the first word, *emphasized* as if it’s in **bold**.<sup>10</sup> In other words, don’t miss *this*. Don’t skim it. Here’s something **greater** than that which afflicts you: “Grace.” I quote this all the time in counseling meetings; in fact I’ve quoted it so much for so long that I don’t even remember where I first read it. But I think it was David Powlison that said something along these lines, “The world has its set of doctrines. One of which is that you are *merely* the product of your past. What’s happened to you *determines* who you are. But that’s *not* the doctrine of the New Testament or the gospel. The New Testament makes plain that we can be fundamentally rewired by the grace of God.”<sup>11</sup>

That’s what’s greater: grace. And to whom does God give grace? To the person with what posture? Verse 6: **But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”**

To these Jewish Christians, James quotes from the Old Testament wisdom literature: Proverbs 3:34.<sup>12</sup> This isn’t a new truth. Humility has *always* been what’s wise. Even though it’s not always been prized. In Paul’s day, for example, the term for “humility” was used in a derogatory fashion. It entailed weakness, shameful lowliness,<sup>13</sup> often used to describe the nature of inferior social classes.<sup>14</sup> In the ancient world, humility was far from a virtue.<sup>15</sup>

And maybe you’d say, “not *only* in the ancient world.” Our world nearly separates its own shoulder patting itself on the back, retweeting its own posts, angling for the best seat. Yet, *this* is the posture of the one to whom God gives grace. And if that’s true, verse 7 makes sense. If *this* is the one to whom God gives grace, what should we do? Verse 7: **Submit therefore to God.**

### a. Humility Toward God (vv. 6-10)

The litany of commands in these verses all could be summarized by *that* idea. Every moment of our life is spent submitting *to God* or to what *we* think is best. While there’s a war within, each imperative listed here is a call to bend the knee, to admit, “I don’t know better.” This is the essence of what it means to be humble toward God.

Back in chapter 1 James described the progression of temptation that works within us. We might’ve wondered, “What about the adversary?” James doesn’t downplay that sinister being’s influence. Part of submitting to God is to, v. 7, **resist the devil**. One of Satan’s primary purposes, even implied within that being’s title, is to separate God and man.<sup>16</sup> God has other, better, purposes. James doesn’t hesitate to say that when we submit to God and stand against His enemy—our enemy—**he will flee from you**. Is this because of our innate strength? Or because we recited some formula? Of course not. I take 1 John 4:4 as the answer: **greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.**

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<sup>10</sup> Vlachos, 138.

<sup>11</sup> I think it’s in *Seeing with New Eyes* by Powlison, but not certain.

<sup>12</sup> An almost exact quote from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint.

<sup>13</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC, 179.

<sup>14</sup> This is how Aristotle and Plato would’ve used the term in *Eth. Eud. 3.3* and *Leg. 4.774c*, respectively. Quoted in Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Hellerman, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Moo, 243.

Yet, a quick warning, this truth in verse 7 is *only* for those who've submitted to God in Christ and have been indwelt by His conquering Spirit. This assurance is not for everyone. Meaning, if you've *not* submitted to King Jesus in this way, do not believe verse 7 is necessarily true for you. There's no assurance that any evil will flee.

The commands continue. Submit yourselves. Resist the devil. Verse 8: **Draw near to God.** Again, isn't drawing near a symptom of the humble heart? I *don't* know better, so I'll come to Him and ask. I'll come to Him and read what He's said. So, does our struggle to draw near betray a spirit of pride, as in, "I got this."

If so, listen to this good news. If we draw near, **He will draw near to you.** He's not aloof. He's always eager to hear from, commune with, those He's loved. Did James know the character of God? Yes. He'd revealed Himself in his own home. You think Jesus stiff-armed James, or didn't have time for him? **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.**

The commands continue. As he's shown us prior, James is concerned with *both* our outward actions and our inner motives. Those two intend to be aligned. So, James writes about both "hands" and "hearts."<sup>17</sup> Verse 8: **Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.**

Though he's called them "brothers and sisters" throughout the book, that *doesn't* mean he won't also call them "sinners." Both labels *can* be true. Both are true. Further, not only does he describe them as sinners, they are also double-minded. We've addressed this "two-ness" at length, but it's worth being reminded that this term very well might have been coined by James himself.<sup>18</sup> It's literally, "two-souled." And it's in direct contradiction to what Jesus commands us in Matthew 22, **to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul** (Matt. 22:37).

So, to the double-minded, James writes, **purify your hearts.** And to the sinner, James writes, **cleanse your hands.** Maybe this sounds familiar, especially if you consider it in context of verse 8, the command to **draw near to God.** Hear Psalm 24: **Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart** (Ps. 24:3).

And as we hear these commands, coming face-to-face with how far we've fallen short, verse 9 makes sense. We're not to be numb to the effects of the fall upon us. Verse 9: **Be miserable and mourn and weep.** Over what? Our dirty-handed sin and double-minded hearts. James goes on: **let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.** This is humility toward God. And in case we don't think that's what James is continuing to emphasize, he bookends verses 6–7 with verse 10: **Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord.**

That's the location—**in the presence of the Lord**—where we see Him rightly. And when we see Him rightly, we're rightly humbled. It seems to be a double-edged sword. Our pride might keep us from drawing near. And *not* drawing near—seeing Him rightly—only exacerbates our pride. But, when we **draw near to God** and He draws near to us, our mouths are stopped. We're brought low. And what does *He* do for those with this posture? He gives grace. Verse 10 reiterates that truth: **Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.**

I think I'd do an injustice to this text to merely individualize it. But James is writing a group of believers, using plural pronoun language, on purpose. He's saying, "You *all* humble yourselves." So, as an application, do we want the Lord's grace to be given this body? Then let's not be puffed-up, strutting, self-absorbed, entitled peacocks. But instead, humbled, low, grateful, recipients of unmerited grace. That's the posture the Lord desires.

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<sup>17</sup> Vlachos, 143.

<sup>18</sup> Moo, 244; Vlachos, 29.

James isn't through talking about humility, but he moves from humility in respect to God to humility toward one another.

### b. Humility Toward One Another (vv. 11–12)

Verse 11: **Do not speak against one another, brethren.** Wasn't James just calling them adulteress sinners plagued by being double-minded dirty-handed friends of the world? And yet here, once again, he calls them, "brethren." To repeat myself, both *can* be true. And both are.

In these couple verses, James describes a lack of humility toward others. Speaking *against* is not the same as speaking *to*, as in lovingly warning someone. He's describing instead the kind of back room slanderous one-upmanship that humans engage in because of insecure pride. As in, "I must tear someone else down so that I appear better, or feel better about myself." James says **do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.** I imagine you're noting some similarities with Romans 14. These passages are quite similar. For the same reasons I mentioned earlier.

It's quite possible that the reference to the law is an allusion to Leviticus 19's instruction to love our neighbor.<sup>19</sup> Like Romans 14, a lack of love can lead to this judgmental posture. And, again, like Romans 14, you can hear the absurd arrogance. When we unlovingly judge others by standards not dictated by the law or its Author, we make ourselves judges *of* the law.

Verse 12 declares just how many Lawgivers and judges there are: **There is only one Lawgiver and judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.** The implication is, "Are you the one able to save? Is that you?" And that implication is made explicit at the end of verse 12, again not unlike Paul's questions in Romans 14,<sup>20</sup> **but who are you who judge your neighbor?**

We're to be humble toward God, toward our neighbor/brother, and third,

### c. Humility Toward Our Days (vv. 13–17)

Verse 13: **Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit."** Consider this group of folks James addresses. It's those that seem to know *when* they will go somewhere, *where* they will go, how *long* they will remain wherever they go, *what* they will do once there, and precisely what the *outcome* will be from what they do.<sup>21</sup> Does any of that sound like humility to you?

He writes, to those with spreadsheets for 2027, v. 14: **Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.** Is James saying it's unwise to plan? Of course not. I just wrote you last week about plans the elders made 2–3 years out. But there's a way to think about our plans that demonstrates hubris. James just quoted Proverbs 3. He also knew Proverbs 16:9: **The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.**

The very best plans—even the wisest plans—do not have guaranteed outcomes. And if we disagree with that assertion, it's either because of our pride or because we've not reckoned with the fallenness of this earth.<sup>22</sup> Our plans aren't guaranteed to last because nothing "under the sun" is guaranteed to. Verse 14 again: **Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You**

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<sup>19</sup> Moo, 250; Vlachos, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Vlachos, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Vlachos, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, "The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even when we will not."

are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. So, to review what James has called us thus far: adulteresses, double-minded, sinners. And *maybe* the most abrasive to our pride is this descriptor: **You are just a vapor.** You've appeared. One day, you will vanish. It's inevitable. There are zero enduring mists.

If that's true, verse 15: **Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."** I trust you hear the application of "submit therefore to God" (4:7) in that sentence. For this reason the Puritans, and many others since them, have employed the Latin phrase *Deo Volente*, or its abbreviation DV, (meaning "Lord willing") when discussing their plans. You say, "Do I have to *say* that?" No, you don't. Should you believe it, *always*? Yes. That's what humility demands. Within the core of our being, we acknowledge that *all* of our plans—even the wisest ones, the ones we devoted decades to—are contingent on the Lord's kind hand and purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Teenagers, young people, maybe you're thinking, "*This* is what my life will look like." Maybe. But, you should expect some curveballs. Sometimes it'll be harder than the think. It won't go as you hoped it might. Other times, in mercy, it'll be better than you could've imagined. **In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other** (Eccl. 7:14).

Believing, **if the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that** demonstrates humility. But what were *they* doing? Verse 16: **But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.** The word for arrogance is in the plural, meaning multiple "arrogances." It could be "arrogant schemes."<sup>24</sup> We'll do *this*, that will yield *that*. That kind of pride is evil.

Verse 17 reiterates just how grievous this posture is: **Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.** We know this verse. It's foundational for understanding that there are not only sins of "commission," there are sins of "omission." If we *know* what's good—or the right thing—to do, and don't *do* it, that's also sin.

We can put all sorts of sins under that "omission" umbrella. But what is the context James says this in? What's the thing we know, but don't always do? It'd be easy to argue that what James primarily refers to here is humbling ourselves. We know that we ought to repent of pride. We know that God instructs us to humble ourselves—before Him, in relationship to others, and concerning our days. And to *not* do that is, in fact, a sin of omission. We dare not downplay it.

## Conclusion

Why does James use such strong language? Why should we see the omission of humility as sin? Because pride is waging war against us; it's dividing us. And God is jealous, not for a *part* of you, but for the whole. He grieves what pride does in His people. He grieves our lesser desires to befriend the world. He grieves our dirty hands, impure hearts, and double-mindedness. That's why He sent His Son. Nothing other than His work can burrow its way into our "two-ness" and rewire what's gone awry.

How does He do that? He gives grace. And He gives it to a person with a particular posture. The path to unity *within* is a low path, a humble path, but it doesn't have to be a lonely one. He walked it first so that we might follow, and that by looking to Him—following where He leads—we might be made whole.

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<sup>23</sup> Vlachos, 154.

<sup>24</sup> Vlachos, 154.