

Bible Fellowship Teaching Plan for James 4:1-17 (November 1, 2026)
Humility, Holiness, and Wholehearted Obedience

Central Truth: An authentic faith is demonstrated by a life of humble submission to God, resistance to worldly desires, repentance from sin, love toward others, and obedient dependence on the Lord in every area of life.

Key Passage (7-8a): “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.”

Supporting Scripture: James 3:13-18, Romans 6:12-14, 1 Peter 2:11, Matthew 5:21, Psalm 37:4, Matthew 12:39, James 1:8, Matthew 6:24, 1 John 2:15, Romans 1:20, Matthew 4:8, John 3:16, John 15:18, 1 John 2:16, John 14:30, 1 John 5:18-19, 1 Corinthians 2:12, 1 John 2:17, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Mark 10:29, Isaiah 1:15-16, Luke 18:13, Matthew 5:4, Luke 5:8, Revelation 12:10, Psalm 37:5.

Opening Question: When disagreements arise, what is usually the first thing we examine--what the other person did wrong, or what is happening in our own hearts?

Background: James continues his emphasis on the relationship between genuine faith and the way believers live. In chapter 3, he contrasted earthly wisdom that produces jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and harmful behavior with the wisdom from above, characterized by purity, peace, gentleness, mercy, and sincerity.

In chapter 4, James applies that contrast to the everyday lives of Christians by warning us of the dangers of worldliness and a lack of humility. He addresses quarrels within the community of faith, selfish desires, divided loyalties, pride, critical speech, presumptuous planning, and failure to do what is right.

His central concern is not simply the outward behavior of believers but the inward attitudes and desires that produce their behavior. Conflict begins in the heart when self-gratification takes precedence over submission to God. The remedy? Submit yourself completely and unreservedly to God, resist the devil, draw near to the Lord, repent of sin, humble ourselves before Him, and demonstrate genuine faith through our treatment of others and our obedience to God's will.

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) Identify how selfish desires and worldly wisdom contribute to conflict and spiritual disorder.
- 2) Explain why friendship with the world stands in direct opposition to wholehearted devotion to God.
- 3) Describe the biblical response to temptation, pride, and sin through submission, resistance, repentance, and humility.
- 4) Recognize the danger of critically judging fellow believers and assuming the role of their judge.
- 5) Practice humble dependence on God when making plans and responding to His revealed will.
- 6) Apply James's teaching that knowing what is right carries the responsibility to do it in every aspect of life.

I. Conflict Begins in the Heart (1-3). Our conflicts with others come from an idolatrous pursuit of the things of the world.

A. James begins with a searching question: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" His answer directs attention away from external circumstances and toward self-gratification that wars against God's intention for selflessness.

B. Selfish ambition, envy, greed, and the desire for personal satisfaction can produce conflict even among believers.

- C. The moral condition of someone who can't control his or her sinful passions is hopelessly confused--unmet desires/murder, asking for things that move us away from God and inner peace.
- D. True contentment is not found in getting what we want but in finding our contentment in God (Psalm 37:4).

Discussion Questions:

- 1) According to James 4:1-2, where do quarrels and conflicts ultimately originate?
- 2) Why is it often easier to blame other people or our circumstances than to examine our own hearts?
- 3) How can selfish ambition or the desire for recognition create conflict in a relationship?
- 4) What does James mean when he says that people ask and do not receive because they ask wrongly?
- 5) How does Psalm 37:4-5 help us understand the relationship between our desires, our prayers, and our trust in God?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) When I become upset with someone, do I first examine my own motives or concentrate on the other person's faults?
- 2) Is there a desire for control, recognition, possessions, or personal satisfaction that's affecting my relationships?
- 3) Are my prayers primarily focused on fulfilling my wishes, or on helping me know and do God's will?
- 4) What would change if I sought for lasting satisfaction in the Lord rather than in getting my own way?

Application: Before responding to conflict, pause and ask, "What desire in my own heart might be contributing to this situation?"

II. Friendship with the World Stands in Opposition to Devotion to God (4-6)

- A. James calls his readers as “adulterous people” to describe their spiritual unfaithfulness.
 - 1. He warns believers against divided loyalties--the attachment to worldly values, ambitions, and pleasures that competes with our allegiance to God.
 - 2. “The world” in this passage refers to the system of earthly desires and values that opposes God and draws people away from Him. A person cannot give ultimate allegiance to both God and the world.
- B. The neutrality of a divided allegiance is impossible (Matthew 6:24).
 Whoever chooses to seek the fulfillment of earthly pleasures becomes an enemy of God. There is no true and loyal faithfulness to God if there's another--whatever--that also gets our affection (1 John 2:15-17).
- C. God longs for us to be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”
 - 1. Verse 5: “Even to the point of jealousy the Holy Spirit Whom God has caused to dwell in us longs for us to love Him with the same love He loves us with, and He cannot rest until He fills us completely--to the exclusion of every other affection.”
 - 2. If He is not Lord of all, He's not Lord at all.
- D. James does not leave his readers without hope. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Mark 10:29), loosens our grip on the things we instinctively reach for, and teaches us to find our satisfaction, security, and joy in Him.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does James mean by friendship with the world? How is it different from loving and serving people who do not know Christ?
- 2) Why is it impossible to serve two masters faithfully? Consider Matthew 6:24.

- 3) What are some worldly desires that subtly compete with our devotion to God?
- 4) How can possessions, reputation, comfort, or success become obstacles to an authentic faith?
- 5) What encouragement do you find in James's statement that God gives more grace to the humble?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Is what area of my life I am seeking the world's approval more than God's approval?
- 2) What receives the greatest share of my affection, time, attention, and resources?
- 3) Am I willing to surrender something I value, even if it interferes with my obedience to God?
- 4) Where do I need to depend more fully on God's grace rather than my own strength?

Application: Identify one competing affection or worldly priority and take a practical step toward putting it where God would have it to be.

III. The Cure for Worldliness and the Lack of Authentic Humility (7-10).

James presents a practical response to the spiritual struggles we deal with.

- A. Submit to God: voluntarily place yourself under His authority and align your will with His.
- B. Resist the devil: refuse to yield to temptation, remembering that Christ has freed believers from sin's rule.
- C. Draw near to God: seek fellowship with Him through prayer, His Word, and a responsive heart.
- D. Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts: turn from sinful conduct and allow the Holy Spirit to transform your heart.

- E. Mourn over your sin: recognize its seriousness and respond with genuine sorrow and repentance.
- F. Humble yourselves before the Lord: acknowledge your sin and dependence on God, trusting Him to forgive and restore you.
- G. Repentance does not earn us salvation. Instead, genuine repentance demonstrates a sincere response to God's holiness and grace. God doesn't just call us to improve our behavior; His goal for us is a transformed heart that seeks Him above everything else.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does it mean to submit voluntarily to God's authority in everyday life?
- 2) Why does submission to God have to come before we attempt to resist the devil?
- 3) According to James 4:8, what is involved in drawing near to God?
- 4) What's the difference between regretting the consequences of sin and genuinely repenting of sin?
- 5) Why does James address both our hands and our hearts?
- 6) How does God's promise to lift up the humble encourage someone who has recognized and confessed serious sin?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) What area of my life have I been reluctant to place under God's authority?
- 2) What recurring temptation do I need to resist rather than excuse or tolerate?
- 3) Am I spending intentional time drawing near to God, or am I allowing other pursuits to crowd Him out?
- 4) Is there a sin I have acknowledged intellectually but not sincerely turned away from?
- 5) Do I truly believe that God's grace is sufficient to forgive me, change me, and help me walk in obedience?

Application: Choose one specific area of disobedience or spiritual neglect.

Confess it to God, take a practical step away from the temptation, and start a habit that draws you closer to Him.

IV. Do Not Judge Others with a Fault-Finding Spirit (11-12). Humility before God should produce humility toward others, including treating others with the same mercy we have experienced from God.

A. James moves from our relationship with God to our relationships with fellow believers. He commands Christians not to speak evil against one another or appoint themselves judges over their neighbors.

1. This warning concerns more than abusive words. It includes the habit of finding fault, condemning others, and treating our own judgments as though they were from God.
2. When we criticize a fellow believer as if we stood above God's law, we cease acting as obedient followers of that law and assume the role of judge. However, God alone is the Lawgiver and Judge, fully able to save and to destroy.

B. This doesn't mean that Christians should ignore sin or abandon biblical discernment. Instead, we must approach others with humility, mercy, and a proper recognition of our own need for God's grace.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What's the difference between discerning right and wrong and critically judging another person?
- 2) How can finding fault in others become a way of avoiding an honest examination of ourselves?
- 3) How does speaking evil against a fellow believer violate the royal law to love our neighbor as ourselves?
- 4) What does James mean when he says that there is only one Lawgiver and Judge?

- 5) How can we honestly address wrongdoing while showing the same mercy we have received from God?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Am I more aware of the shortcomings of others than to my own spiritual weaknesses?
- 2) Have I spoken critically about someone without knowing all the facts or examining my motives?
- 3) Do my words encourage restoration and growth, or do they just tear someone else down?
- 4) How would my relationships change if I were quicker to listen and slower to speak?
- 5) Is there someone I need to approach with greater humility, patience, or mercy?

Application: Before criticizing someone, ask whether your words are necessary, truthful, loving, intended to help, and Christ-honoring. Pray for that person and examine your own heart before speaking.

V. Make Your Future Plans with a Clear Realization of Human Frailty and God's Sovereignty (13-16). Because life is brief and the future belongs to God, believers should make plans with trust and humility.

- A. James addresses people who act as though they control the future. Their mistake is not planning itself but presuming that their plans and success are entirely in their own hands.
- B. Human life is like a mist that appears briefly and then vanishes. We don't know what tomorrow will bring; even our next breath depends on God's sustaining grace.
- C. James teaches believers to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." This is not an excuse for careless living or a rejection of

responsible planning. It is a call to plan diligently while remaining willing to surrender every expectation to God's wisdom and sovereignty.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What's wrong with making plans without considering God's will?
- 2) How does the picture of life as a mist challenge our idea of our control over the future?
- 3) What's the difference between responsible planning and presumptuous confidence?
- 4) How can we practically acknowledge God's sovereignty when making decisions about such things as work, family, finances, ministry, and retirement?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Do I make my plans prayerfully, seeking God's wisdom and remaining open to His direction?
- 2) Am I holding tightly to a particular plan or life goal instead of trusting God?
- 3) How do I need to reorder my priorities and goals to align them with God's plan and purpose for my life?

VI. A Final Call to Authentic Obedience (17). James concludes with a principle that reaches beyond planning: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

- A. Sin includes not only doing what is wrong but also failing to do the good God has shown us we ought to do.
- B. Authentic obedience applies to every aspect of our lives.
- C. We should never set aside our obedience as if we were the ones who decide how we should obey God's commands.
- D. Christian maturity is seen, not merely in growing knowledge, but in growing obedience.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does James 4:17 teach us about sins of omission--failing to do what we know is right?
- 2) Why is growing in Christian maturity about more than increasing our biblical knowledge?
- 3) How can we know what is the right thing to do?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- 1) Is there something God has already shown me to be right that I have avoided or refused to do?
- 2) Do I sometimes justify disobedience because it is convenient, popular, or seemingly harmless?
- 3) What good thing must I do today to align my obedience with God's plan for my life rather than postponing it for a more convenient time?

Application: Identify one clear act of obedience you've been postponing. Take a practical step toward doing it, and entrust the outcome to the Lord.

Summary: James, chapter four calls believers to examine their hearts and evaluate whether their lives truly reflect the wisdom that comes from above. The conflicts we experience often reveal selfish desires within us. When earthly ambitions and pleasures become more important than our allegiance to God, our devotion becomes divided, our relationships suffer, and our prayers can become self-centered.

The remedy is not simply to improve our outward behavior. We must submit to God, resist temptation, draw near to Him, repent sincerely, and humble ourselves before His holiness. God's response to the humble is abundant grace, forgiveness, and restoration.

That humility will also shape our relationships. We're not called to speak evil against fellow believers or assume God's role as judge. Nor should we make

plans as though we control the future. Instead, we must depend on God's sovereignty, seek His will, and faithfully respond to Him in loving obedience.

Ultimately, James reminds us that genuine faith is demonstrated through humble dependence on God and practical obedience to His Word. We must not merely know what is right; we must do it.

Closing Challenge: Ask yourself three questions as you leave this lesson:

1. What must I surrender today? What desire, ambition, or worldly attachment is competing with my devotion to God?
2. Where must I repent? What attitude, habit, or relationship needs to change?
3. What must I do? What clear act of obedience have I been postponing?

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

The invitation is to live every day with a surrendered heart, wholehearted devotion, humble relationships, and loving, trusting obedience in the Lord.

Sunday School Lesson for November 1, 2026
James 4:1-17

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this first Sunday of November, we're just past the midpoint of our study of the challenging letter of James. Throughout our study of the gospel of John, we heard the Lord Jesus call His disciples to follow Him. In this brief letter, James shows us just how authentic believers truly follow Jesus so that we might become "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Throughout this brief letter, James has called us to examine our lives from the perspective of what's in our hearts. In today's study from chapter four, James leads us to examine our lives to see how the wisdom he talked about in the latter half of chapter three is being revealed. As James now describes various actions and attitudes that should be absent or evident in the life of every authentic follower of Christ, you might ask yourself, "Is this an illustration of God's wisdom at work in my life today?"

In verse fifteen of chapter three, James reminded us that the wisdom prized by the world "is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." As he builds on this idea to provide an even stronger encouragement to pursue godly wisdom, he asks his readers in the first verse of chapter four, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?"

He doesn't offer any details about these controversies that might lead us to choose one side or another, because it's not his intention to address the issues. It's not about having different ideas or opinions about rights and possessions and places of prominence in the church; it's about how disagreements were being dealt with in a worldly spirit and the wisdom of the world, because--when you get right down to it, the conflict isn't external--it's internal, worldly mindedness as the flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.

James wants us to understand that any disagreement can be resolved peaceably and honorably if we can settle the war in our own hearts, and that's only possible when we do two things: humble ourselves before the Lord and resist Satan. It sounds so simple, doesn't it?

So, James's immediate response to his question, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" is this: "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" Our quarrels with others don't ultimately begin with our circumstances or with other people. They come from evil desires within our own hearts.

Now this may be a hard pill to swallow. We usually look to others to blame our problems on--God, circumstances, other people in our lives--even those closest to us. But James says our own "passions," "cravings," "pleasures," or what the Amplified Versions calls "[hedonistic] desires" are at the heart of the problem; in fact, the Greek word is the word from which we get our word, "hedonism"--the idea that pleasure or self-gratification is the greatest good in life. If we seek to satisfy our passions--our self-gratification--there's no limit to the evil that will lie in our wake.

You've probably all heard the old story that says our spiritual and natural natures are like two dogs who are locked in a bitter fight to the death. The question is asked, "Which one will win?" and the given answer is "Whichever is fed better." As attractive as this illustration may be, it's not at all consistent with the Word of God.

The Bible says that when we were saved, we were delivered *from* the domain of darkness and transferred *to* the kingdom of God's beloved Son--Colossians 1:3. In Ephesians 5:8, the Word of God says "you were formerly darkness, but now you *are* light in the Lord." Since God says you *were* darkness but are now light, you can't be both light and darkness at the same time. The believer's old, sinful nature has not simply been wounded, it's dead,

and at the moment you were regenerated by the Spirit of God, you were freed from the power of sin to rule over you.

But you and I still sin. The death of your old nature ended your unwilling submission to sin, but it didn't end the temptation to sin. Salvation isn't a shot that immunizes us from sin, but salvation does give us a choice we never had before not to sin. That's why Paul says in Romans, chapter six, verse twelve, "***Don't let*** sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires." Because of your new nature in Jesus Christ, you don't have to obey the evil desires of sin, you don't have to give in to temptation, because neither the devil nor anything else can make you do it anymore. Christ has set you free.

But, for some reason, we still sin. Why? The death of the old nature ended your unwilling submission to sin, but it didn't end the existence or the temptation to sin. Sin is still around, and what the bumper sticker says is so true: "Lead me not into temptation, I can find it on my own." Why do believers still fall into sin? Because of our enslavement to sin before we came to Christ, we were conditioned to sin.

All we knew before we came to Christ was life of sin, a life of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-gratification because we were ruled by our fallen, sinful nature that we inherited from Adam. We've been so conditioned by that former way of life, and that former way of life is almost all that we see lived out in the world around us, that it's hard not to fall back into that pattern of what James calls the passions that are at war within us and Peter says wage war against our very souls--First Peter, chapter two, verse eleven--luring us away from Christ and the wisdom from above that James just wrote about and back into the habits of worldly wisdom so deeply ingrained in us from before we came to Christ.

James describes four degrees of these passions-- "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 might be asking at this point, “Did some of James’s readers actually stoop to murder someone else just because they couldn’t get what they wanted?” Although commentators are divided over whether James is speaking literally or figuratively, one writes, “There seems, at first, something almost incredible in the thought, that the believers to whom St James wrote could be guilty of such crimes, but Jewish society was at that time rife with atrocities of like nature; and men, nominally disciples of Christ, might then, as in later times, sink to its level.”

A very early, first- or second-century church manual called “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” includes this directive: “My child, flee from every evil and everything that resembles it. Be not angry, for anger leads to murder, nor jealous, nor contentious, nor wrathful; for, of all these things, murder is [provoked].” Even though the people James was writing about were motivated by greed--like David with Uriah’s wife and King Ahab with Naboth and his vineyard--, their greed wasn’t satisfied even after the death of the one who stood in the way of what they wanted.

On the other hand, James may have been thinking of the Lord’s words in Matthew, chapter five, verse 21: “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.”

“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” And why is it that there’s still an emptiness in your heart that you can’t seem to fill? “You do not have, because you do not ask.” Does that mean we should ask for things that we lust after and covet? Certainly not! James seems to run all of these ideas together to show that the moral condition of someone who can’t control his or her sinful

passions is hopelessly confused, and he concludes this picture of a life that's totally messed up by saying in verse three: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

If you only ask for things that are intended to bring comfort to your life and make you less dependent on God, your prayer is a selfish one, and, if God were to give you what you asked for, He would only be giving you more ways to sin. If it's ultimately all about feeding your own need for self-gratification, there's no way you'll ever find peace in your life because you've cut yourself off from the only sure source of true satisfaction. The only sure source for contentment in life is God. Psalm 37, verse four: "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart."

You can almost hear James's voice rising, his fervency intensifying as he seems to shout in verse four: "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" In calling them "adulterous people," James is using the term as the Old Testament prophets Hosea, Isaiah, and Ezekiel often did--not speaking of unfaithfulness in a physical relationship but unfaithfulness to their covenant relationship with God that demanded unconditional allegiance to Him. James might have also been thinking of the Lord Jesus' words to the Pharisees who had asked for a sign, to which He replied in Matthew, chapter twelve, verse 39, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign." God is the husband to whom the Christian is joined as His wife, and nothing should interfere with that relationship.

In accusing them of the spiritual duplicity that characterizes the worst of the double-minded person he wrote about in chapter one, verse eight, "unstable in all his ways," James asks, "Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God" and "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God?"

James even builds on what the Lord Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter six, verse 24: "No one can serve two masters, for

either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” The neutrality of a divided alliance is impossible. Whoever chooses to seek the fulfillment of earthly pleasures becomes an enemy of God. There is no true and loyal faithfulness to God if there’s another--whatever--that also gets our affection. Just as a wife who pursues a friendship with someone who is trying to seduce her becomes the enemy of her husband, so also “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Is James being excessively critical or dramatic? Not in the least. He sees what’s happening in individual lives, in homes, in congregations, and he raises the alarm so that everyone would recognize the profound, potentially disastrous place we put ourselves in when we try to play both sides of the field for whatever reason.

John puts it this way in First John, chapter two, beginning in verse fifteen: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions--is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

As you read your New Testament, you’ll find different meanings of the word, “world.” Depending on the context, it could mean the whole universe as in Romans, chapter one, verse twenty; our planet as in Matthew, chapter four, verse eight; all the inhabitants of the earth as in John chapter three, verse sixteen; the organized system of fallen humanity that opposes God as in John, chapter fifteen, verse eighteen; or the collection of all things earthly--possessions, riches, fame, power, and pleasures that draw us away from God and are obstacles to the cause of Christ as in First John, chapter two, verse sixteen. It’s this last definition that we find in verse four of James, chapter four.

This world has the devil for its ruler--John, chapter fourteen, verse thirty. It lies completely in the power of the Evil One--First John, chapter five, verse nineteen. It hates all those whom the Lord Jesus has chosen out of the world--John, chapter fifteen, verses eighteen and nineteen. Just as there is a Spirit of God that leads us into all the truth, there is a "spirit of the world," that leads to the very opposite--First Corinthians, chapter two, verse twelve. This world--with its lusts--is passing away--First John, chapter two, verse seventeen; and the sorrow the world offers as a counterfeit to true remorse that leads to repentance, works death--Second Corinthians, chapter seven, verse ten.

James, chapter four, verse four and the entire Word of God can't be any clearer: "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world"--in the sense of the collection of all things earthly and dominated by Satan--"makes himself an enemy of God."

Then, to underscore the deep love God has for us that ought to be reciprocated by every living thing on earth--particularly those for whom Christ died--he adds in verse five: "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?'" In spite of the numerous interpretations of this verse that scholars have suggested, this seems to be the best: "Even to the point of jealousy the Holy Spirit Whom God has caused to dwell in us longs for us to love Him with the same love He loves us with, and He cannot rest until He fills us completely--to the exclusion of every other affection." Truly, God desires and deserves our full devotion and love if He is to be our Lord. And if He is not Lord of all, He's not Lord at all.

If this seems to be rather harsh, James wants us to know that the more of our lives we surrender to God, the more He gives us in return--verse five: "But he"--God--"gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"

Even in this world, He gives far more than we give up, and adds “the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” as James said in verse twelve of the first chapter. Jesus Himself taught in Mark, chapter ten, beginning in verse 29: “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”

God resists those who persist in making friends with the things of this world, seeking its advantages, adopting its standards, and accepting its praise. But to those who humbly submit their wills to Him, who give up the world with its counterfeit gifts and empty promises, and are willing to be despised by it in order to keep themselves unspotted from it, He gives grace--grace to walk closely with Him in spite of the allurements of the world. Cindi Murphy writes, “And this greater grace keeps meeting us. God doesn’t forgive us and then leave us alone to wrestle our desires into submission. By his Spirit, he loosens our grip on the things we instinctively reach for and teaches us to find our satisfaction, security, and joy in him.” This grace springs up into eternal life within us, and it will one day have its perfection in glory.

So what’s the cure for the allurements of the world and all it offers? Verse seven: “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” It’s as simple as that--wholly, completely, unreservedly commit all you are, all you have, and all you could be to the Lord. But it’s a decisive, urgent, clearly focused act. It’s the first thing James would look for in answer to his question from last week: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” It’s the person who unconditionally submits himself or herself to God.

The word “submit” simply means to place or arrange one thing under another, to subject or subordinate one person to another. Here in verse seven, it speaks of the humble, voluntary willingness to align yourself under the

authority of God. This is the first and most necessary step in order for us to live the life you and I were created for.

While we are to yield to God in all things, we are to yield to the devil in none. First, submit yourself to God; second, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” One commentator writes, “No one is safe who yields in the least to the suggestions of the tempter.” Satan can be resisted. It’s not that we can’t help falling back into sin, because we’ve been freed from sin, and the Holy Spirit is always present to show us the way out of temptation--if only we choose His way out. In His temptation in the wilderness, the Lord Jesus showed us how we can resist the devil, even as He did.

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” Third, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” We can never hope to expect anything from Him if we prefer to stay away from Him. And it’s not so much that God waits for us to turn to Him before He gives us His grace--His grace is always working in our lives. As we respond to His grace, we understand more clearly how much He loves us as we feel His closeness in a way we never did before.

As we draw near to God, there’s something required of us: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” James may have been thinking of Isaiah, chapter one, verses fifteen and sixteen, where the Lord says to the people, “Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; cease to do evil.” The washing of the hands was a symbol of repenting of sin, and the heart is the seat of our motives and intentions. If we are to approach God, we must repent of our sin and allow the Holy Spirit to purge us from all those desires--those passions--that keep us from being all that God designed and desires us to be.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that cleaning up our lives is what causes God to save us. If that were the case, none of us could ever clean up our lives enough to deserve His grace; in fact, any attempt to do so is an offense to God

Who sent His own Son to bear the penalty for all our sin. James is calling us to holiness and singleness of heart; not that by these actions we earn God's favor, but that these actions reveal our genuine sincerity in response to the holiness of God.

Our hearts also must be purified. Not only must there be an outward change of behavior but an inward change of the heart that drives any, true outward change of behavior. If the heart is wrong, nothing can be right, and James has already told us of the central role of the heart in our moral decision-making and willingness to follow Jesus.

James addresses these commanding words to those he calls "sinners" and "double-minded"--not two different groups of people, but those he has spoken of before who try to live for both God and the world. His call to them is to just "stop it"--because--as he said in verse four, "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God," and there were some who were actually trying to be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time.

The response of those who take to heart James's commanding call to authentic discipleship and personal holiness should be deep, genuine sorrow and repentance from sin--verse nine: "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." This was the attitude of the publican in Luke, chapter eighteen, whom the Lord says in verse thirteen "would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" And Jesus told the people who had come to hear Him in the Sermon on the Mount--Matthew, chapter five, verse four: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Grieving over our sin and the suffering it brought to our Lord Jesus causes us to mourn, but His full forgiveness brings us indescribable comfort.

Then, circling back to what he said in verse seven, James concludes this call with our submission to the Lord in verse ten: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." Since the cause of all our quarrels, fights,

worldly desires, and unanswered prayers is found in our desire for self-gratification, the cure for that is self-surrender--voluntarily embracing a place and position of abject humility before the Lord. This was the response of Peter as he fell before the Lord--Luke, chapter five, verse eight--and cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord;" and David when he confessed to the Lord the full realization of his sin in Psalm 51: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."

"And He will exalt you;" "He will lift you up." As we humble ourselves before the Lord, truthfully acknowledging our sin and the fact that our sin was against God Who is holy and righteous, He Himself will lift us up." The very God Whom we rejected as we chose the things of the world over the things of God--things that are passing away above the things that are eternal--things that revealed our rejection of God Who created us in His image and sent His Son to bear the full punishment for all our sin--this God, Whom we've offended, rejected, sinned against, and mocked--**He** lifts us up when we agree with Him that we've sinned and that we deserve nothing but eternal separation from Him. But because we accepted what His Son did for us, He lifts us up--forgives us of all our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, thereby restoring a right relationship with Him. That's why they call it "amazing" grace; and, praise God, there's so much more we could add here!

/Having laid out the overarching principles that naturally flow from the law of liberty and the royal law that should guide our genuine faith that's validated by our lives that have been inwardly and outwardly transformed, James moves on--rather abruptly--to two practical applications. In reality, he's actually returning to his main point, because the central portion of this letter primarily deals with our duty towards our neighbor--what he's called the royal law in chapter two, verse eight.

Although he changes the way he addresses his readers from "sinners" and those who are "double-minded" to brothers, he's not only softening the tone of

his words, he's also subtly scolding them for not acting like the brothers they should be.

His first application is found beginning in verse eleven: "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 neighbor?"

Once again, it seems as though James has a specific situation in mind that he feels must be addressed, perhaps related to the Judaizing Christians who criticized their brothers and sisters who didn't think circumcision or some other standard set by the Law of Moses was necessary for salvation. As we've already seen, disagreements like this continued to cause dissent in the early church. So, James addresses two issues here: brothers speaking critically against one another at all, and each presuming to decide what part of the Mosaic Law was and was not required of believers. When someone misinterpreted the freedom we have in Christ and denounced those who violated that misunderstanding of our freedom, he was not a doer of the royal law but a judge--and a very bad one, too.

Applying what he said in the first part of chapter three about the tongue being "set on fire by hell" and wrongfully used to bless God while at the same time cursing those made in His image, James calls out those who have condemned a fellow believer as if they were self-appointed judges over them. The one who takes it upon himself or herself to "speak evil" against another violates what James called the royal law: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This evil speech is not so much abusive language as it is the love of finding fault in others. Those who have young children know it as tattling. It shows we're paying more attention to the conduct of others than to our own

behavior and that we have a very inadequate understanding of our own failures.

It's also placing ourselves above the law as if it didn't apply to us and pushing God aside so we can be the judge. This is what James refers to as speaking evil against the law and judging the law. When that happens, James says, "you are not a doer of the law but a judge." In reality, however, "There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy." Here again, if we submit ourselves to God and humble ourselves before the Lord, we can trust Him to judge according to His impartial, perfect righteousness. After all, that's how we would want to be treated.

Cindi Murphy writes, "This [attitude] rarely feels rebellious. It often looks responsible, confident, or even well-intentioned. Yet James exposes what lies beneath it: a quiet independence that assumes we know best, control more than we do, and can live without continual dependence on God."

So, James asks, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" No one who's acutely aware of his or her own sins and failures and truly speaks out of "the wisdom from above" that "is ... pure, ... peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" will *ever* be eager to point out the flaws in others.

And one more thing: if we enjoy pointing out others' mistakes, aren't we aligning ourselves with Satan, the "accuser of the brethren" that we read about in The Revelation, chapter twelve and verse ten? There is a place for dealing with another's sin that we'll find in the closing verses of James's letter, but we must always trust the Holy Spirit do His work of conviction of sin as we treat others with the same mercy we've been granted. Here again, it's best to be "quick to hear and slow to speak."

The second application of our humility that James makes in this chapter is found in verses thirteen through sixteen: "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."

In these verses, James moves on from exposing the sin of rash judgment to address the sins of presumption and self-confidence. Throughout scripture, we learn that no sin is more loathsome in the sight of God than pride. "Come now" or "Now, listen" is a call to attention, for what follows is a solemn, urgent address to his readers. And the message is this: no one should make any decision in life without considering the frailty of human life and securely seeking and depending on the providence and blessing of God.

For those who think they can rely on the plans that come from their own prideful self-confidence, James calls them back to reality: "you do not know what tomorrow will bring." Things can happen that you could never have foreseen or even imagined, and we could all name events in our own lives that never happened the way we expected. Our next breath--our next heartbeat--is not guaranteed. The future belongs to and is known to God alone. As a result, it's incredibly presumptuous to trust in our own ability as if we had the power to control the future, just as the Lord declared in his parable of the rich fool in Luke, chapter sixteen who bragged about his grand and glorious plans only for God to say, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

"Instead," verse fifteen, "you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" This is where true wisdom and submission are found. Only this moment is ours, and we must do everything we can to make the most of it, without remorse for a past that we can never change, and without being afraid of a future we can't know and may never possess. We should constantly be aware of the fact that, moment by moment, we are absolutely dependent upon God, not only for the way in which our lives are spent, but for our lives being prolonged at all.

One word of caution, however. This is not to be taken in the sense of “whatever happens” is God’s will and we don’t bear any responsibility for the outcome. James doesn’t say that sound planning for the future is sinful, but he does say that every plan for the future should be entrusted to God’s sovereignty. “It is planning diligently while remaining willing to surrender every expectation to his wisdom.” We are to “Commit [our] way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act,” as David wrote in Psalm 37, verse five.

It’s prideful boasting about our plans as if we control the future that James condemns. Instead, we should humbly seek and follow God’s will for our lives as He reveals it to us, and thoroughly trust Him through those times when His will isn’t so clear. As one commentator reminds us, “There is nothing on which the success of our plans depends over which we have absolute control; there is nothing, therefore, on which we can base the assurance of success but [the] favor [of the Lord].”

In verse seventeen, James concludes this section of his letter with a comprehensive principle that includes everything he’s said thus far in his letter: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” In the immediate context of boasting about tomorrow, James says that no one can ever plead ignorance as an excuse. We all know how brief and fragile life is, and we should all reflect on the reality that not even our next breath is a given--all of life depends on the grace of our sovereign God.

The broader scope of this reminder is based on the fact that our relation to God is one of humility and utter dependence, and anyone who chooses an attitude of self-confidence and independence from God sins. These sins include not only those things we do that violate Christ’s law of liberty but also our failure to do what we ought to do to fulfill that law, now written on our hearts. Knowing what is evil creates an obligation to avoid it, and knowing what is good establishes an obligation to do the good we know to do.

Even in simple, everyday things. Like a stop sign means stop, and speed limits aren't suggestions. Three New Testament writers tell us to obey the laws of those appointed over us. We don't think of ourselves as lawbreakers. We justify it in our own minds: "Everyone else is doing it." "I'm in a hurry." "It's not hurting anyone." But that's not the point. We knew what was right, and yet we intentionally chose not to do it. That's arrogant disobedience. That's sin.

"That's exactly [the kind of thing that] James is exposing this week: we often treat obedience like a suggestion--something we can adjust based on what feels reasonable in the moment. And we do the same thing with God's Word [in other areas]. We hear it. We understand it. We even agree with it. But instead of obeying it fully, we [set aside our] obedience [as if we were the ones who made the rules]." "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

"James leaves no room for a faith that knows God's will but refuses to act on it. We often think of sin only in terms of wrong actions, yet James reminds us that neglecting known obedience is also rebellion. Genuine faith responds [in obedience] to what God has revealed. Christian maturity is seen not merely in growing knowledge, but in growing obedience."

For his readers, James was once again reminding them of the greater responsibility they now bear to let their faith be demonstrated in all of life, because a faith that doesn't reveal itself in acts of faith is empty, vain, useless.

In the contentious, antagonistic, confused world we live in today, how should we live in response to James's difficult, demanding words? End your love of worldly things; set your mind on things above not on things here on earth. Don't give your highest allegiance to the things of this life, but give your highest allegiance to God as you place your life in His gracious, loving hands. Allow Him to direct every part of your life, and not just on Sundays. Stay in your lane. Do what you know to do. Don't quibble about what God expects

of you; and, if you're not sure if what you're doing is right, get out your Bible and search the scriptures, pray and seek God's wisdom, trust Him to direct your paths.

“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.” These are the promises of God who, like James, longs for each of us to be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Thank you again for being part of our study of the letter of James whose objective in writing this letter is so that we would each be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Next week, in the first twelve verses of chapter five, James aims words of warning to the rich who trusted in their riches. Next week, in the first twelve verses of chapter five, James aims words of warning to the rich who trusted in their riches while abusing and ignoring those whose labor brought them their riches and also encourages those who were suffering from this abuse to remain steadfast and patient, trusting in Lord's compassion and mercy.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

The resources for this lesson include James: Christianity in Real Shoe Leather by Joel Gregory; Planting Roots unpublished manuscript, James: Rooted in Christ, by Cindi Murphy; The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction and Comments, by Joseph B. Mayor; Notes on the Bible by Albert Barnes (1834), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor's Bible, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor's Greek Testament - Nicoll, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Exposition of the Entire Bible by John Gill (1746-63), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; ICC New Testament commentary on selected books, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal,

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