

Sermon 15: James 4:1-4: Worldliness

OUTLINE

Worldly relationships
Worldly prayers
Worldly state

INTRODUCTION

Are you for the world or are you for God; are you governed by the spirit of the world, or the Spirit of God; are you ruled by the wisdom of the world, or the wisdom that is from above? The book of James works on the biblical binaries of wise or foolish; righteous or unrighteous; being for God or for the world. Too often Christians are in the world and of it. Today we take this matter of worldliness head on in James 4:1-4. James has been speaking about wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual and demonic in the last section, 3:13-18 contrasting worldly and godly wisdom. Our section is related to that as it deals with matters of peacemaking and worldliness. James we know is dealing with the matter of true religion; this includes keeping oneself unstained from the world, 1:27. As James builds up to calling upon the worldly to repent he goes for the jugular as he gets specific about worldliness. This portion is relevant for the backslidden Christian who needs to see their sorry state and repent; and it is helpful for the hypocritical Christian, the one who is self-deceiving and thinks they are believers, but they are not and this is exposed by their worldliness. For the general believer who is in a constant struggle with the world, the flesh and the devil, we will be reminded of the dangers and seriousness of worldliness. We have three points, worldly relationships; worldly prayers; worldly state. We want to look at what happens to our relationships if our hearts are owned by the world; how this impacts our prayer lives; and how God sees it.

Worldly relationships

V1-2a, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.' James sets up where he wants to go with a question, to which he will provide the answer. The question concerns the matters at hand that he is addressing. Large scale and small scale fights among believers, this is where James begins. A fight or war could describe large parties pitted against each other; quarrels describe a one against one animosity. Tragically James highlights that these disturbances happen 'among you.' Believers who should be 'peacemakers', Matt. 5:9 are often 'warmakers'. Sadly Paul records these realities of large scale divisions, 1 Cor. 1:10-11, 'I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.' As well as small scale infighting, Phil. 4:2, 'I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.' Being believers does not make us immune to these realities, we still have the flesh, and we still give in to sinful desires, Paul is fearful that this situation will prevail in Corinth, 2 Cor. 12:20, 'For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.'

What does cause this problem? James goes back to the source of the problem, the sin in our hearts. Where many blame sin in society, sin in institutions, James goes after the sin in our hearts. Matt. 15:19, 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.' What causes the wars and fights and divisions that plague the human race is our sinful desires. James uses the word 'passions' in the Greek it is the word *hedones* from which we get hedonism, referring to our sinful desire for self-gratification. Wars happen when two people who both want to be god, who both want their desires to prevail, to be put first, to be considered as more important insist that their desires be fulfilled. Spouses war against each other, even over which take out they are going eat; what car they are going to buy; who gets to shower first, because a desire to satisfy our own desires and not serve another is ruling our hearts. Children fight against their parents because they want, want, want, and rail against the laws, traditions, people who are in the way of their self-gratification. We can dress up the reasons for why our desires are right with all sorts of biblical arguments and justifications, showing how putting ourselves first is most logical, most wise and will save the most money. Truth can be taken up as camouflage for a heart that is at base driven by its own selfish desires. We could spend the rest of our time looking at how politicians, church members, people of various races and nationalities, employees, bosses, everyone causes damage to others because they are driven by selfishness. In James context, the desire for the rich to not treat the poor as equal but to be recognized as more important, their unwillingness to part with their riches to help the needy, the poor who were likely discontent, the believers who were suffering who wanted peace and pleasure instead, and all the other sins, James is tracing their source back to our sinful selfish desires.

He describes them as being at war within us. The believer who is born again has died with Christ and the once depraved heart is renewed in a love for God. But there is still sin in us, Gal. 5:17 describes the Christians experience as the flesh and the Spirit warring against each other, 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.' If you are losing the war with your own desires, then others in your life will lose as you allow those desires to spill over into anger, contention, demand, coveting, etc. We have been united with Christ to end sins tyranny over us, though its presence is still within us. The Spirit has been given to us to give us the strength to mortify sin and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. If we are undisciplined in restraining our minds, and our desires, then sin will result in our outward actions as well. James is highlighting a condition that we are happily living with, that we do not see as problematic. He is using the fruit of our quarrels and fights to expose the root of our heart problem, that worldly priorities that are controlling not the glory and the will of God.

James spells out the destructive escalation in v2. He gives two examples one outward, one inward; one obviously sinful; one more insidious and deceptive. 'You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.' You might think that murder is overstating things, but I know of Christians who have murdered their spouses. This is the one end of the spectrum. And the small seemingly natural sin of coveting is on the other. But even coveting, wanting what another has is a deadly sin, Cain and Abel; Saul and David; the Pharisees and Christ are all reminders that envy and coveting when given sway can result in deadly action. Think of coveting giving rise to quarrels.

I want the recognition and I don't want it to go to them, this is coveting recognition and results in feuds. I want to be first, I don't want to be grouped that those people, I want to be seen as better, I want to be the one who gets the credit, I want to be thought of as wise and so want to be right, these are all forms of coveting which result in us warring against others, saying horrible things about others. The sin that lies behind Tall Poppy Syndrome is the unwillingness for others to be well thought of which results in half-truths, lies, slander, and misrepresentations.

You will know that the world has your heart if you are constantly quarrelling.

Worldly prayers

V2b-3, 'You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.' The second way in which worldliness manifests is in our prayer lives. Firstly, we can see that the worldly person does not pray. For those who walking near to God, all things are done in prayer. The Lord's Prayer teaches us daily prayer for our daily needs when we are to go to Him for our daily bread. But those who are backslidden of not saved, their minds have defaulted to the godless way they used to live where instead of deliberately seeking God's will in all things and obtaining all things from His hands, they are following the nose of their desires and resorting to schemes and infighting and obsessing over their desires. Not only are they prayerless as they default to living in light of their wills and not God's; but some may not pray because in their hearts they know that what they seek is sinful; they do not want to feel conviction, they avoid God in order to be able to pursue their sins with less guilt.

Worldliness not only causeless prayerlessness but unanswered prayer as well. James is not talking about those prayers that are good and right where God says no, because He has better plans for you. Nor is James talking about those prayers where God says not yet where His will is for us to persevere and to be shaped by returning to Him again and again. James says that prayers that are sinful are not answered by God. Firstly, this is because sin in general impacts our prayer lives, the scriptures are clear: Ps. 66:18, 'If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.' If we have hearts that are cherishing, preserving, excusing, hiding, treasuring sin, this is doublemindedness, God does not answer these prayers. Job 35:12-13, 'There they cry out, but he does not answer, because of the pride of evil men. Surely God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it.' Many times you will hear even unbelievers talk about how they prayed and God did not answer, here is why. He does not answer the proud and evil, He gives grace to the humble. James sounds a lot like Isaiah, 1:15-17, 'When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.' Micah a contemporary of Isaiah says the same, 3:4, 'Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.' Rank hypocrisy where we accommodate sins in our lives deeply impacts our prayer lives. God is a good Father who does not condone sin in our lives, He is gracious, but He is also a good Father who chastens those whom He loves. The only way to know that we have not got these stoppages in our prayer lives is by keeping short accounts with God; keep fighting with sin; and keep clean consciences.

Secondly, there are prayers God does not answer because He only answers those prayers that are in accordance with His own will. 1 John 5:14, 'And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.' The Lord's Prayer trains us to pray God's will, 'Thy will be done.' To go into the presence of the God of all things, the owner of all, whose will is perfect, who has given us His commands and disregard His will while wanting to move the hand of His power and get access to His treasures, this is an attempt to play God and God would be denying Himself by entertaining such irreverence. This forces us as believers to be mindful in prayer and pray according to God's will. Too often we do not. Self creeps into our prayers and conforming our will to His is part of the process by which God sanctifies us. Blanchard has some pertinent words to us about even the supposed good things that we ask for in a self-willed way: 'It is possible to pray for many good things in the wrong way. For instance, it is possible to pray for the conversion of one's parents or children primarily because it would be so much better to live in a Christian home. It is possible to pray for the conversion of a workmate because he is a difficult fellow with whom to work and life would be so much more comfortable if he was converted. It is possible to pray for a missionary need to be met in order to avoid the pressure of the need. It is possible to pray for the success of your church, your fellowship, your Christian work or organization because that would increase its stature. What is your concern when you pray? When you pray for missionaries, when you pray for your church, when you pray for your home, your parents, your children, what is your *first* concern? What could you write above your prayer time that would sum up exactly the primary concern of your intercession?'¹ Are we worldly or are we godly, are we seeking our will or His?

Worldly state

V4-5, '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. ⁵ 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"?' Laying out the realities that worldliness hurts our relationships turning all our social networks into warzones; and attacks the foundation of our spiritual lives, our prayer lives, James now weighs in with a prophetic call out. He literally says, 'Adulteresses,' this is not because there was a group of promiscuous women, James is addressing men and women in the church. No, it is because in the OT, Israel was portrayed as a bride and God as her husband, Is. 54:5, 'For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.' And Israel's unfaithfulness was cast as adultery, Jer. 3:20, 'Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord.' Israel was guilty of abandoning God for other gods, of going to the gods of other nations for what God promised to provide, protection, provision, blessing, victory, etc. James picking up on this idea applies this charge against those Christians whose hearts are not going after idols, but sin/worldliness.

It should be noted that these believers were not openly idolatrous, they were confessing Christians in the church. It is unlikely that their sins were of the

1 John Blanchard, [*Truth for Life: A Devotional Commentary on the Epistle of James*](#) (Darlington, England; Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 1986), 251.

immoral kind that you find among the pagans. No, they would have predominantly been respectable, cultural and socially acceptable sins. Sins of partiality, and prejudice, and sins of the tongue; sins of omission like neglecting the poor would have been among them. In the immediate context sins of the tongue; pride; jealousy and ambition giving rise to practices that should not be among Christians. What this teaches us is that worldliness in this context is not about conforming to fashions, or owning modern tech, or obvious immoral acts, but things done in the church, by Christians, alongside prayer, where we being controlled by the same sin that controlled us, and shapes the unbelieving world, is continued to allow to influence us and impact the church. But let us not miss the biggest part of our spiritual adultery, loving our sins more than God; conforming ourselves to them and not Him; obeying their will not His. We give our hearts back to the sins we were saved from instead of to the One who saved us.

This worldliness James tells us put us at enmity with God. That word enmity means hostility. Here's the question does worldliness make God hostile towards us, or us towards Him. Technically it is both For God hates sin in the believer as much as the unbeliever though He deals with us as a Father. But I think James is telling us in strong language what our action amounts to. We know that before we were saved, we were at enmity against God, we mocked, rejected, disobeyed, criticized, ignored, etc. James is saying that when we do not pursue the holiness we have been saved to; when we do not honour God by doing His will; when we tread upon the sacrifice of Jesus that saved us from sin by preferring it above Him, we are acting like the enemies we once were. James states it again, 'Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.' There is a shock factor here. You are religious and you think you are a friend of God; but if you prefer your sins and desires above His will, and this can be seen by the way you treat you brethren, you are not His friend but His enemy. If you are backslidden, this is how you are acting and you must repent. If you are only pretending to be a Christian, this is what you are and you too must repent.

V5 drives home the wrongness of our spiritual adultery, and the worthiness of God of all of our hearts by reminding us of the jealousy of God, v5, '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"?' The attribute of jealousy in God is not a sign of weakness but His supreme glory. He alone because of who He is has the right to demand what He is owed, all of our worship, all of our obedience, all of our love. The scripture is clear, Ex. 34:14, '(for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God).' It underlines both the rightness of our honouring Him as God, and the consequences if we do not. When James appeals to the scriptures, he is not giving a direct quote but is summing up the general teaching of the scriptures as Paul does in Eph. 5:14. This jealousy is right, as He has made us for Himself, and we must not give our hearts to another. In fact this jealousy is praiseworthy and a great sense of assurance for us. John Blanchard brings this home when he writes: 'It is a jealousy of the divine Lover of his people, the one who loves you with an everlasting love, who was jealous for you the moment you first drew breath upon this earth, who was jealous for you when you were groping for the first hold on life, who was jealous for you when you took those first conscious steps into sin, jealous for you when you first heard his name, jealous for you when you rejected him, jealous for your salvation as he brought the gospel to you in one way and another, through one person and another, through one means and another, until

finally he broke through in the power of the Holy Spirit and brought you to living faith. What is more, he is jealous for you now, jealous for your spiritual welfare, jealous for you in every temptation and in every trial, jealous lest you should be robbed by covetousness, compromise, worldliness, prayerlessness or disobedience in any shape or form. He is jealous that you should have that fulness of blessing, those riches of grace that he longs to bestow upon every one of his people. When we speak about the jealousy of God we mean at least all of this, for his is an infinite jealousy.² God is jealous for His glory and our good, His glory in our good.

The next section will tell us how to respond if we are backslidden. If even though saved out of the world it still holds our hearts. It will call us to repentance. So let me ask you, are you worldly, are you playing with those sins from which you have been saved? is your heart for God or another? Is the evidence of sinful desire gripping your heart apparent in how you sin against others in your relationships and in your prayer lives. God is jealous; He is worthy, let us be all and only His, because of who He is and what He has done in saving us in Christ.

² John Blanchard, [*Truth for Life: A Devotional Commentary on the Epistle of James*](#) (Darlington, England; Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 1986), 261.