

Wars, Worldliness, and God's Will

James 4:1–10

An Expository Sermon

by David Roper

Preachers are always struggling to find an opening sentence that will capture the attention of their audiences. It would be hard to imagine a more attention-getting opening than the question with which James begins chapter 4: “Whence come wars and whence come fightings . . . ?” (v. 1).

“Where do wars come from?” “Why do we have to have wars?” Questions like these have surely plagued every mind at one time or another. The little boy looks at a scene of slaughter on the television set, then looks up at his father and asks, “Daddy, why do people fight?” The smooth-faced soldier in the trench, still in his teens, looks at the destruction about him and asks, “What am I doing here?” The woman, burying her only son, tries to be brave, but as the tears stream down her cheeks, she is screaming inside, “Why? Why do we have to have wars?”

It seems that wars have always been with us. In the six thousand or so years of recorded history, mankind has had almost 15,000 wars—an average of about 2.5 a year. Of an estimated 185 generations of men, only 10 have not seen war. There have been major wars—such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War. But there have also been lesser-known wars—such as the War of Whiskers, the War of the Oaken Bucket, the War of Jenkin’s Ear—lesser-known but still very real wars where lives were lost and civilization was set back.

An artist was once commissioned to paint a picture depicting war. He painted a picture of a woman sitting in the ruins of a destroyed city. The woman represented the world. As she sat among the rubble, she was unravelling all the knitting she had done for the previous two hundred years.

This question then is one that concerns us all: “Whence come wars and whence come fightings . . . ?” Scholars have spent many years analyzing the underlying causes and the stated

reasons for wars. They have discussed wars fought for land on which to live, wars fought to increase wealth and power, wars fought to protect one’s borders. But what is the inspired answer? Listen carefully to the reading of James 4:1–4. James’ answer may at first disappoint you, but as you think about it, you will see that he gets to the heart of the problem:

Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your pleasures that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and covet, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it in your pleasures. Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God (James 4:1–4).

James says that “wars and fightings” come *from within*. They do not come from disputed border boundaries. They do not come from the necessity to help the economy. They do not come from the need to improve the human race. They come from within—from the “pleasures that war in your members.”

At the conclusion of the previous chapter, James discussed *peace*, and he noted that that, too, has its origins from within. In verse 17 he said, “But the *wisdom* that is from above is first pure, then peaceable.” In verse 18, he added, “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for them that make peace.” Peace comes from those who have the wisdom from above, who are peace-loving and peace-making. But war and fighting come from those without that wisdom, who are motivated by lusts or wrong desires. It may be lust for power, lust for pleasure, lust for prestige, lust for position, lust for possessions. It may be one desire on the part of one person, another desire on the part of another person. But when you finally get enough people together with all their lusts pointing in the direction of war, war is inevitable.

Once a father was trying to occupy his young son. In a magazine he found a picture of a globe of the world and tore it into several pieces to make a homemade jigsaw puzzle. He gave it to this son with the instruction to piece the picture back together. Because of his son's lack of familiarity with the globe, he thought this would keep him occupied for some time. To his surprise the son was soon finished. "How did you do it so quickly?" asked the father. "It was easy," replied the boy. "I found out that there was a picture of a man on the back and I put together the man. *When the man came out all right, the world came out all right.*" If we could but correct the hearts of men, we could eliminate war from the world!

But those who have been following carefully the text from James will have noted that the author is not primarily concerned about wars in general. The points we have made thus far will apply to carnal warfare, but James is concerned about "wars and fighting" much closer to home. The full question at the start of the chapter reads, "Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you?" His great concern is for fighting among members of the body of Christ.

We may be hesitant to admit it but through the years there have been "wars" in the context of the church—often battles for the truth, but sometimes battles with less worthy motivations. In the days of the apostles there were battles over keeping the Law of Moses and over the nature of Christ. In the U.S. Restoration Movement, there have been battles over the concept of restoration—involving such matters as missionary societies and instrumental music. But, more to the point, there have been those "lesser" wars that have destroyed the harmony of local congregations: such as the You-Defeated-My-Pet-Project War, the One-Elder-Runs-the-Show War, the They-Won't-Let-Me-Teach War, the They-Fired-My-Favorite-Precacher War.¹ Especially in the last cases do these words of James apply: "Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your pleasures that war in your members?" (v. 1). Wars between nations are tragic, but nothing is more tragic than a religious "civil war" with brother arrayed against brother.

But again if you listened carefully to the reading of the first four verses of chapter 4, you also noted that James' emphasis is not really on war,

but on the *pleasures* or *lusts* that produce "wars and fightings." I have entitled this lesson "*Wars, Worldliness, and God's Will*" because James uses the subject of wars to get our attention, then concentrates on the subject of *worldliness*. James continues to use military terms and illustrations (as we will see), but his main thrust is on an attitude toward the world that results in problems in the church and in the life of the individual Christian. His words are one of the strongest indictments against worldliness to be found in the Bible. "Know ye not," he asks in verse 4, "that the *friendship of the world* is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God." If you desire biblical proof that church fights and worldliness go hand in hand, just look at the church at Corinth.

Taking my cue from James, it will be my purpose to devote the body of this lesson to a study of worldliness—to use chapter 4, verses 1 through 10, to discuss *the curse, the cause, and the cure* of worldliness.

I. THE CURSE OF WORLDLINESS

(4:1, 4)

I can summarize the curse of worldliness by saying, "*Worldliness hurts*—hurts everybody and everything."

One author² noted that three different wars are discussed in this text. First, there is war with God. This is suggested by verse 4: "Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God." You are either in God's army or Satan's army. If you are not fighting the devil, you are fighting God. Then there is war with others (especially those in the church) as expressed in verse 1: "Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you?" And finally, there is the most crucial war of all—the war within the individual himself. As verse 1 closes, it speaks of the "*pleasures that war in your members.*" The "*members*" spoken of here are the parts of the physical body. James is here speaking of the battle that takes place within the individual—the same battle Paul speaks of in Romans 7:23ff. These three categories—God, the church, and self—summarize how worldliness hurts.

First, worldliness hurts God and His cause. "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is

enmity with God?" (v. 4). Nothing hurts the cause of God like those who are supposed to be His children living no differently from those in the world.

Second, worldliness hurts the church. Someone has said, "It is a beautiful sight to see a boat in the water; it is a saddening sight to see the water in the boat. Even so, it is an inspiring sight to see the church in the world; it is a saddening sight to see the world in the church!" Jesus said that His followers are to be "in the world" (John 17:11), but not "of the world" (John 17:14). Many people become dissatisfied with what the world has to offer, so they come to the church to see what the church has to offer—but far too often all they find is more of the world!

Third, worldliness hurts the individual himself. Persisted in, it will damn his soul!

But perhaps we should pause here to ask, What is this "worldliness" that causes "wars and fighting," that hurts God, the church, and the individual? What is "the friendship of the world" that James speaks of in verse 4? The word *world* is used in a number of ways in the Bible. It can refer to the physical world—the earth, the grass, the flowers, the birds. It can refer to the people in the world—as in the verse "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). Or it can refer to the things in this world that appeal to the flesh as opposed to the spirit. *Worldliness* has reference to this last definition and means *exalting the things of this world above the things of God*. "The friendship of the world" means that the things of this world are more important to you than God Himself.

The word *worldliness* takes in a great deal more than the average Christian thinks of when he hears that word. To most of us, a "worldly" person is one who engages in certain immoral acts, when in reality we might never engage in those particular acts, and still be a very worldly person.

I once worked up a lesson sheet with this section to complete: "Underline those things that would be included in the word *worldliness*: (1) gambling; (2) dancing; (3) drinking; (4) forsaking worship to work or rest; (5) seeing that our children get their public school lessons, but not their Bible school lessons; (6) being more concerned about paying the bills than going to heaven." The point I was trying to make was that

(4) through (6) are just as surely worldliness as (1) through (3). (I might also note that I included three more points to try to illustrate what it meant to exalt the things of God above the things of the world: "(7) putting obedience to God above family or friends; (8) cancelling a bowling date to be able to attend every service of a gospel meeting; (9) including in a busy schedule some time every week to visit.")

How hard it is to keep from being overwhelmed by this world. We can get so involved in the things of this life that the things of God become of little importance. Someone once said that "Ford has made more atheists than Ingersoll," for Ingersoll just tried to appeal to men's minds while Ford gave them something else to occupy their time. Today, the same could be said for those who invented and perfected the television set—and other modern time fillers and killers!

Jesus spoke of one way this world can get the better of us in the parable of the sower. In His explanation, He had this to say about the thorny ground: "And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word; and *the cares of the world*, and the deceitfulness of riches, *choke the word*, and he becometh unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22; italics mine). In this day of inflation, unemployment, and the pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle, the "cares of the world" can indeed "choke the word"!

So then, as we speak of "worldliness" in this lesson, let us be aware that we are talking about immorality—things that should never be named among Christians—but let us also be aware that we are talking about a general attitude toward this world that can slowly but surely destroy our relationship with God. And let us remember that *whatever* form worldliness takes, it *hurts*—hurts God and His cause, hurts the church, hurts the individual Christian.

With this as a background, let us turn to our text to discover the *cause* and *cure* of worldliness.

II. THE CAUSE OF WORLTLINESS (4:1–5)

The first four or five verses of our text give us the cause of worldliness. As I read again verses 1 through 4, notice the emphasis on *self*. Fourteen times in four verses, the second person pronoun "you" or "your" is used:

Whence come wars and whence come fightings among *you*? come they not hence, even of *your* pleasures that war in *your* members? *Ye* lust, and have not: *ye* kill, and covet, and cannot obtain: *ye* fight and war; *ye* have not, because *ye* ask not. *Ye* ask, and receive not, because *ye* ask amiss, that *ye* may spend it in *your* pleasures. *Ye* adulteresses, know *ye* not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God.

All that is necessary to become a worldly person is to elevate *self*.

First, *want things for SELF* (vv. 1, 2a).

In verse 1, James speaks of “your pleasures that war in your members.” In verse 2, he says “ye lust” and “covet.” In the original language, each of the words translated “pleasures,” “lust,” or “covet” is a different word. The first word (v. 1) is the word from which we get “hedonism,” living for pleasure. The second word (v. 2) is the usual word for “desire.” Here it refers to *unlawful* desires. If I desire my own wife, that is not lust. If I desire someone else’s wife, that is lust. The third word (v. 2) is the word for being “jealous” or “envious”—I am jealous of another and want what he has.

The picture is of a totally selfish person who is not concerned about others or God; he wants what *he* wants, to gratify his every wish. “I don’t want much,” says the Imperialist, “just the land that adjoins mine.” “I don’t want much,” says the worldly-minded person; “just give me my own way and we’ll get along fine.”

Second, *elevate SELF above God* (v. 2).

And how does the worldly-minded person attempt to satisfy those desires? By any means at his disposal. We have already noted that these lusts or pleasures result in “wars and fighting,” according to verse 1. Again verse 2 says, “ye kill” and “ye fight and war.” In this context these words are used figuratively for the infighting that takes place when someone wants his own way and will cut down anyone who stands in the way. John said, “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15).

Because verse 2 reads a little awkwardly in the ASV and KJV, and since some liberties can be taken with punctuation, it has been suggested that the punctuation might be legitimately altered so the first part of the verse reads like this, “Ye lust and have not, [so] ye kill; and [ye] covet,

and cannot obtain, [so] ye fight and war.” *Either* way verse 2 is punctuated, however, the picture is that of a lustful man trying to satisfy his desire *by his own power and strength*.

What is wrong? He has left *God* out of his plans. Instead of trusting in self, he should have trusted in God. “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (the last part of the verse). *Prayer* is more important than *power*.

In this connection, it should be noted that when a man is consumed with lustful desires, he can *never* be satisfied. Even when the totally self-centered individual *gets* what he desires, it is *still* true that he “lusts and has not” and “covets and cannot obtain.” Success only makes him want more, so he goes on “killing, fighting, and warring.” Only in the God-centered life, the life concerned with others, the disciplined life, can there be contentment. “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

Third, *think only of SELF in your prayers* (v. 3).

In verse 3, James seems to anticipate an objection. He has just said, “Ye have not, because ye ask not.” One can then imagine someone responding, “But I *did* ask. I asked God to give me that raise. I asked God to give me that promotion. I asked God to give me a bigger house . . . a lakeside cottage . . . a boat. So don’t tell *me* I didn’t ask!” James’ response is that when you *do* ask, you ask with the wrong motives: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it in your pleasures” (v. 3).

It has been well said that the purpose of prayer is not so much to get our will done in heaven as it is to get God’s will done on earth. Unfortunately, some think of God as an indulgent old grandfather whose only purpose is to satisfy their every whim! Their prayers are totally self-centered—not concerned with others, not concerned with the will and work of God—but concerned with what they desire: “Ye ask amiss [or wrongly], that ye may spend it [or waste it] in your pleasures.”

Fourth, allow SELF to be deceived by the world (v. 4).

James gets to the heart of the problem in verse 4: “Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.”

Adultery, an illicit sexual relationship, is se-

verely condemned throughout the Bible. Adulterers shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10). Unlike other sins, sexual sin is “against” the body (1 Corinthians 6:18). But physical adultery is not what James is primarily concerned about. The KJV has “ye adulterers and adulteresses,” but the original text has only “adulteresses.” Why does it have only “adulteresses”? Because only James’ female readers are guilty? No, rather because James is using the word *adulteresses* in a figurative sense. He is writing to members of *the church* and the church is pictured as *the bride of Christ*. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: “I have espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2; see also Romans 7:1ff.; cf. Ephesians 5:31, 32). James is saying that the church, Christ’s bride, has been unfaithful to Christ, has been guilty of *spiritual adultery*. The margin of the ASV has this note: “That is, who break your marriage vow to God”!

James’ Jewish readers would be familiar with this figure, for Old Testament prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel stressed that God’s people had been espoused to the Lord—and if they were not faithful to Him in all things, they were guilty of spiritual adultery and must, therefore, suffer the most terrible consequences!

When we become Christians, we confess the name of Christ. When we do so, we commit ourselves to Him. Then we are baptized—baptized into the church (1 Corinthians 12:13), thus becoming a part of Christ’s bride. We therefore, in effect, make the most solemn vows to be faithful to Jesus and His cause. Most of us would have little respect for a woman who treated lightly her marriage vows, betraying and being unfaithful to her husband. May God help us to understand that being unfaithful to the Lord is the same type of sin and is cut from the same cloth!

Apparently, some Christians in James’ day did not realize this. James says, “*Know ye not . . . ?*” The word here translated “know” means “to know by reflection,” by sitting down and thinking about it. Apparently, these had never given any real thought to the full implication of their lack of faithfulness. They had been *deceived* by sin.

But in what way were James’ readers “unfaithful”? By directing their affections to this

world instead of to God. Let us continue in verse 4: “Know ye not that the *friendship of the world* is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a *friend of the world* maketh himself an enemy of God.”

James places the world on one side and God on the other. If you love the world, he says, you hate God. Which implies, on the other hand, if you love God, you will hate the world. The two are diametrically opposed. You cannot love them both. Satan does not mind a divided loyalty, but God does! “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

Two words are used in verse 4 that give insight into how many become worldly, unfaithful to God, guilty of spiritual adultery. The first is the word translated “friendship” or “friend”: “. . . the *friendship* of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a *friend* of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.” The words *friendship* and *friend* come from the ordinary word for friendship love and affection. In and of itself, it carries no suggestion of anything that is unsavory, lewd, or immoral. But in this context it is definitely tied with adultery. This says to me that one does not become an adulterer or adulteress in a single step. There first is an ill-advised “friendship” that *leads* to the adultery.

A married man works in an office in which there is an attractive woman. They visit; they talk. One day they go to lunch together. He finds her easy to talk to; they can talk without all the responsibilities of married life intruding. They have other lunches together. On a pretty day maybe they take part of the lunch hour to walk through the park. On another day he perhaps goes shopping with her. When word reaches his wife, she confronts him with the situation, and he acts offended! “Why we’re just friends—just good friends!” he protests—and maybe adds, “What’s the matter? Don’t you *trust* me?”

If that man is not deliberately unfaithful, he is terribly naive! No, I am not saying that the wife at this point has “grounds” for a scriptural divorce (Matthew 19:1–9), but I *am* saying that the man is *wrong* and that at some point he passed casual friendship and is flirting with an illicit friendship that can only lead to disaster. He is sinning against his wife and against God!

But is not the same thing true with regards

to this world? How many want to flirt with worldliness? How many want to be friendly with the world, not planning to cross over the line! So teenage Christians go to the prom—not to dance but “just to watch.” So members of the church of all ages watch R-rated movies, read suggestive books, listen to licentious music. “But it doesn’t really affect me,” they say. Thus some continue to run around with their old boozing, foul-mouthed, dirty-minded crowd. “They won’t influence *me*” is the protest. “What’s the matter? Don’t you *trust* me?”

Trying to be friendly with the world without being harmed by the world is like a mouse being friendly to a mousetrap, a deer being friendly to a hunter, a young lady trying to be “just friendly” with a man trying to seduce her? “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?” says James.

The second word that gives insight into the process of becoming worldly is the word in the last part of verse 4 translated “would” or “will” in the KJV: “Whosoever therefore *would* [*will*] be the friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.” The word in the Greek text refers to an exercise of the will. My interlinear translates the word as “*resolves*.” This says that worldliness is a result of an action *in the heart*. James said in chapter 1: “Each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. Then the lust when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is fullgrown, bringeth forth death” (vv. 14, 15).

That this is true in the case of physical adultery is obvious. In the “Marriage Enrichment” films, Paul Faulkner suggests that if you are married and someone of the opposite sex makes you feel “nervous,” you had better stay away from him or her!

But this is also true of spiritual adultery. Occasionally, someone whom everyone thinks of as a solid Christian seems to change overnight, becoming the most ungodly and worldly of individuals. But the change did not really occur overnight. That person’s *mind* was being programmed with worldly thoughts, worldly values, worldly attitudes—for days, weeks, months, perhaps even years—until at last he *resolved* to be the friend of the world.

Never doubt it, that which we feed into our minds and into the minds of our children *does*

affect us—if not today, then tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but surely and inevitably.

How do we become worldly individuals? By the elevation of *self*, we: want things for *self*, elevate *self* above God, think only of *self* in prayer, and allow *self* to be deceived by the world.

But the situation is not hopeless. There is a cure.

III. THE CURE FOR WORLDLINESS (4:5–10)

Before noticing that cure, we first need to say a few words about verse 5. Some commentators think verse 5 is the most difficult verse in the book of James. The KJV reads: “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?” The question is whether this verse belongs to the previous section on the curse of worldliness or to the following section on the cure for worldliness.

Part of the problem is whether the “spirit” spoken of is a person’s spirit or the Holy Spirit. Since no distinction was made in early manuscripts between capital letters and small letters, there is no way to know for certain. The KJV has a small “s” on *spirit*. The translators apparently thought this was the human spirit and translated the verse accordingly.³ On the other hand, *spirit* can start with a capital “S” and can refer to the Holy Spirit. Many translators thus translate the word.⁴

The whole matter could be easily settled if the “scripture” spoken of in the first part of the verse were a single Old Testament reference. We could then see how the word “spirit” was used in context. But there is no specific Scripture that uses those words. So James is saying that, *in general*, the Scriptures teach this point.

What difference does it make in the meaning? If the word *spirit* refers to man’s spirit, the words translated “lusteth to envy” are probably used in a bad sense and James is probably saying that the Scriptures confirm what he has been saying about the lustfulness of man.⁵ On the other hand, if the word *spirit* refers to the *Holy Spirit*, then James is drawing a *contrast* with man’s lustful yearnings. Man desires selfishly, but God’s Spirit yearns for *us* for *our* good.⁶

I tend toward the view just mentioned—that James is here speaking of the Holy Spirit. This, to me, ties in better with the following verse: “But *he* [God’s Spirit] giveth more grace. Where-

fore he [the Holy Spirit] saith,”⁷ (KJV). Whether I am correct or not, it is true that our God “is a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5), who desires and demands faithfulness on the part of His spiritual bride! As Paul told the Corinthians: “For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2).

But how can we be faithful? Or if we have been unfaithful, how can we return? The remaining verses give us the *cure* for worldliness. It was an exciting day when Jonas Salk discovered the cure for polio. There will be rejoicing around the world when the cure for cancer is discovered. But neither of these is as important as the cure for worldliness. Physical disease can destroy the body; worldliness destroys the soul.

The emphasis in the first four verses, which told of the cause of worldliness, was on the worldly-minded individual. We suggested that the exaltation of SELF was at the heart of worldliness. The emphasis in verses 6 through 10, however, is on *God* and submission to Him:

But *he* giveth more grace. Wherefore the scripture saith, *God* resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. Be subject therefore unto *God*; but resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to *God*, and *he* will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye doubleminded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of *the Lord*, and *he* shall exalt you (James 4:6–10; italics mine).

The cure for worldliness is in our depending on, and exaltation of *God*:

First, *accept the grace of GOD* (v. 6).

Frankly, if we had only our own strength on which to rely, the situation would be hopeless. But we have the grace of God, His unmerited favor, to help us meet the challenge. Verse 6 begins: “But he [God]⁸ giveth more grace.”

It was through grace that we were saved initially (Ephesians 2:8). But the need for God’s grace did not cease once we were Christians. Now we need God’s grace to *stay* saved. So God gives “*more* grace.” Writing to those already Christians, the Hebrew writer said, “Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace

to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

There are so many ways that God helps us: He has given us His word. We can pray to Him. He has given us meaningful work to do. He has promised His divine protection (1 Corinthians 10:13). His Spirit “helps our infirmities” (Romans 8:26). He forgives us when we sin (1 John 1:7–9). Indeed He has given us “*more* grace.”

The Greek word translated “more” literally means “greater.”⁹ The pull of the world is great, but God’s grace is greater. The guilt of sin is great, but God’s grace is greater. Through the grace of God, we can meet any challenge this world may place before us!

As proof that God will give us needed grace, in the last part of verse 6, James quotes from Proverbs 3:34: “God resisteth the proud, but *giveth grace* unto the humble.”

However this passage not only teaches that God gives grace, it also teaches that we must qualify for that grace. God resists the proud, the self-sufficient, but gives His grace to the humble, the ones who recognize their needs and come to rely on God.

If we would take advantage of the cure for worldliness, we must first humble ourselves so we can accept God’s grace.

Second, *be obedient to GOD* (v. 7).

The result of this humility will be submission to God. Verse 7 begins, “Be subject therefore to God.” The word *subject* comes from a military term that means “to stand in rank,” to recognize one’s rank and act accordingly. In other words, if you are a buck private, don’t try to act like a general! *God* is our spiritual Commander-in-Chief; let us submit to Him, obey Him without question!

An important part of this submission is to decide whose side we are on. Verse 4 implied that we have to decide between God and the world. But the one who is using the world to lure us away from God is the devil. So now James not only says that you must “be subject therefore to *God*,” he also says, “Resist *the devil*, and he will flee from you.”

The word *resist* is not a passive word. It refers to *active* opposition. It is another military term that literally means “to set in battle array against.” (All allergy sufferers will find it interesting that the original Greek word here is a first cousin to the word *antihistamine*.) The picture is

of the Christian soldier in his place in the army of God, fighting with all his might against the forces of evil. Unfortunately, too many members of the church have never decided whose side they are on and are opposing nothing.

If you do actively oppose the devil, “he will flee from you” (last of v. 7). Our enemy is formidable, but not irresistible. On television, Geraldine used to say, “The devil made me do it,” as though she had no choice. Movies such as *The Exorcist* have sold the idea that the devil can take over a person against his will, that evil is as powerful as, if not more powerful than, good. But James gives you the truth of the matter: “Resist the devil, and he *will* flee from you.”

Submit to God. Be obedient to God. *He* will give you the strength to resist the overtures of this world and Satan.

Third, *become more like GOD* (v. 8).

We have noticed several military terms that are used in our text. We should hasten to say, however, that we are not suggesting there should be the distance between ourselves and God that would normally exist between a private and a five-star general. Rather there is to be a closeness between ourselves and God. James suggests this as he begins verse 8: “Draw nigh [or near] to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

What a promise! God as our close personal companion! But this is conditional upon our first “drawing nigh” to God. How can we draw nigh (or near) to God? A number of things could be mentioned.¹⁰ We need to follow the New Testament with its better hope (Hebrews 7:19). When we fall short, we need to repent (Psalm 34:18). We need to come to God in prayer (Hebrews 4:16). Every possible suggestion, however, can be summed up by saying that *we need to become more like God*.

My dog is an outdoor dog and has to stay in the back yard. However, our back door is mainly glass and my dog has learned he can peek through the curtains to keep up with the household. When I lie down on the couch to watch a football game, he begins to scratch at the door as if to say, “Hey, pay me some attention.” Frequently, my wife feels sorry for him and opens the door. In a moment I have a white furry tornado in the middle of my chest, licking my face—while my wife stands by the door, about ten feet away, laughing. On those occasions, guess which

one I feel closest to, a nearness to? I love my pup, but even though on such occasions he is as physically close as it is possible to get, I am nearer to my wife even though she is several feet away. *Why? Because I have more in common with my wife. We think much alike; we love each other.*

This is so with God. “Drawing nigh to God” is not a matter of moving east, west, north, or south, or up or down. As far as location is concerned, “he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). “Drawing nigh to God” rather has to do with becoming *more like God*—so we have things in common, where God’s thoughts become ours.

To do this a great many changes have to come into most of our lives. This change is expressed like this in the last part of verse 8: “Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye doubleminded.”

James uses some of his strongest language in this section of his letter. And he doesn’t smile when he uses it!¹¹ He doesn’t even use the word *brethren* in the verses we are studying. This fact, along with James’ use of the strong words *sinner* and *doubleminded* have convinced some that James is not here speaking to Christians. But the fact is, children of God can get in bad shape spiritually. When Simon offered to buy apostolic powers with money, Peter said he was “in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). Application can be made to nonmembers, but I believe James is speaking straight to the heart of every Christian!

James says we need to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. The psalmist said, “Who shall stand in [God’s] holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3, 4). The need for “clean hands” and “a pure heart” means we need to be clean *inside* and *out*. It is important to be clean on the outside—to have a good influence on others (Matthew 5:13–16). But it is just as important (or more so) to be clean on the *inside*.

The word *purify* means “to make chaste.” The writer has been speaking of spiritual adultery and the fact that it is a result of a heart problem. Now he says that if we are to overcome worldliness, we must first make our *hearts* chaste and pure. Those to whom he is writing he calls “doubleminded.” They were part-time adulterers. Part of the time their minds were with God and part of the time with the world. One can

even imagine them saying to God, "But those other little affairs don't mean a thing. You know I love you best!" "Straighten up your act," says James by implication, "Get your heart pure!"

How do we cleanse our hands and purify our hearts? By setting our hearts on God and doing His will. The Bible says, "Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth" (Colossians 3:2) and "Ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth" (1 Peter 1:22). For the non-Christian this means he needs to be obedient "from the heart to that form of teaching" (Romans 6:17) as he is baptized into the death of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, and raised to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3, 4). For the erring child, there is a need for repentance, confession of sins, and prayer to get right with the Lord and His people (Acts 8:22; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9), followed by the faithful Christian life (Revelation 2:10). For *all* of us, there is the need to strive constantly to be more like God—in thoughts and deeds.

Fourth, *humble oneself before GOD* (vv. 9, 10).

Tied so closely with cleansing the hands and purifying the heart is the matter of penitence. It is with this that James closes his discussion of how to cure worldliness: "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall exalt you" (4:9, 10).

These are sad words. Is James against one being happy? No, for in the next chapter he says, "Is any cheerful? let him sing praise" (5:13). The wise man said, "A cheerful heart is a good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). What then is James saying? He is making the same point Ecclesiastes 3:4 makes: There is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh."

I enjoy a good laugh as much as anyone. But sometimes it is not the time to laugh; it is the time to weep. When is the time to weep? When there is sin in the life. When there is sin in the world. When there is sin in the church.¹²

How easy it is to become complacent about sin—or even indifferent or hardened. Some years ago someone wrote an article entitled "Laughing Ourselves Into Hell."¹³ Let me share it with you:

Everywhere you see billboards which shout at you, "Hilarious . . . Funniest comedy of the year." On TV, radio, and movies,

people are knocking themselves out, trying to entertain. They think that if America would collapse in mirth, all would be well.

Frankly I don't feel like laughing. I can see ideals, morals, and heritage dying before our eyes. In night clubs, half-naked women go through contortions and tell filthy jokes while America laughs. In bars men and women sit with their drinks about them. A half-drunk person rises and tells an obscene tale, and they all roar.

At a Washington cocktail party, top government officials stand, liquor in hand, plotting how to win the next election. Around them, partially drowning their conversation, is the hollow laughing of men and the shrill cackling of sophisticates. A man tells of losing his shirt at a race track—and it sounds funny to all. Two men stand in a corner. One says, "Some broad," and winks; they both laugh.

America finds sin very funny. We are not the only ones that have done so. Babylon thought sin funny—then came the handwriting on the wall.

There seems to be an absence of heartfelt sorrow for sin in our land. We need to recognize sin and be genuinely sorry because of it. "If my people . . . shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins, and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). *Let's stop laughing ourselves into hell.*

Sin is no laughing matter. Sin cast our first parents out of the Garden of Eden. Sin filled this world with pain and sorrow. Sin compelled Jesus to leave heaven. Sin nailed Jesus to the cross. Sin will condemn every soul that does not turn to Jesus in humble obedience! When sin runs rampant in our country, our hearts should be grieved. When sin is tolerated in the church, our hearts should be enraged. When sin is in our lives, our hearts should be broken. James says, "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness." "Godly sorrow worketh repentance," according to 2 Corinthians 7:10. When Peter fully realized what he had done, he went out and wept bitterly.

And if we *will* thus sorrow for sin, what then? Earlier James said, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." Now he says: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift thee up"¹⁴ (KJV). Humble yourselves in penitence and obedience and God will give you the grace you need—"and he shall lift thee up!" "He shall lift thee up" in the joy of forgiveness. "He shall lift thee up" in renewed service.

“Blessed are they that mourn,” said Jesus, “for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

What is the cure for worldliness? We must enthrone God in our lives instead of self: depend on Him for help; be obedient to Him; become more like Him; humble ourselves before Him.

CONCLUSION

We started this lesson by considering James’ opening question: “Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you?” We have spent most of our time considering the curse, cause, and cure of worldliness. We noted that the primary cause of worldliness is the elevation of *self*—“I want what I want when I want it.” Then we noted that the cure for worldliness is the elevation of *God*—serving Him, obeying Him, putting Him first.

No one should think, however, that we totally abandoned the topic of “wars and fightings.” *It is almost impossible to pick a fight with someone who has died to self and who lives only for God.* It is hard to fuss with one who turns the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), who goes the second mile (Matthew 5:41), who is willing to suffer loss rather than hurt the cause of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:7), and who is not overly concerned with his own “rights” (1 Corinthians 8–10). The prime example is Jesus, totally selfless, totally God-centered. What a hard time His enemies had trying to get Him to react in an ugly fashion!

As we, therefore, close this presentation on “Wars, Worldliness, and God’s Will,” we do so with the prayer, “Help us to imbibe the spirit of Jesus—that peace might reign, that we might not be worldly people, that God will ever be exalted.”

Footnotes

¹This idea of greater and lesser wars came from a

class by Dean Bryce at the 1982 O.C.C. Lectureship.

²Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature* (Wheaton, Ill.: SP Publications, Inc., 1978), pp. 116–127.

³Most of the “standard” translations take this position.

⁴Alford, *Amplified Bible*, Weymouth, New Testament in Basic English, Broadus, Goodspeed, etc.

⁵There is another possible translation of the verse which takes “spirit” to refer to the soul, but uses “lusteth [yearneth] to envy” in a good sense: “The spirit which He [God] made to dwell in us, [He] yearneth for even unto jealous envy.”

⁶See the marginal rendering in the ASV.

⁷Or this could read, “it [the scriptures] said.”

⁸A few paragraphs earlier I put “the Holy Spirit” in the same brackets; God and His Spirit are one.

⁹Interlinear.

¹⁰Most of the reference which follow use the term “nigh” or “near.”

¹¹See James 4:9.

¹²Roy C. Deaver suggests 1 Corinthians 5:2 as an illustration right here.

¹³The author is unknown. This is slightly revised and updated.

¹⁴The young people sing a chorus with these words.

Visual-Aid Notes

The basic outline of the lesson can be placed on the chalkboard, an overhead transparency, a chart, the flannelboard, or key-word cards. There are three points under the CURSE of worldliness, and four each under the CAUSE and CURE of worldliness. Emphasize the words *self* and *God* under CAUSE and CURE by underlining, using a different color, or whatever.

Since the main points all start with “C”, you might want to start the sub-points with the same letter. Under CURSE, you could have “Cause of God” (or “Christ”), “Church,” and “Christian.” Under CAUSE, many terms come to mind: “Corruption,” “Contrariness,” “Contentious,” “Centered on self” (and maybe “Calloused”). Under CURE, words like these might be appropriate: “Consent,” “Commit,” “Cleanse,” “Cry.” Use your sanctified imagination.