
Prayers

To God

Pray as many times as you can throughout your day, and bless the Lord your God through your words and deeds.

For myself

Weekly theme: doubts

Pray for people who struggle to have faith in other people and who find their lives limited because they will not trust others

For others

Thank You, Lord God for the many people I know and love. Thank You for the many things that have happened to me that give meaning to my life . Thank You for the many things You have enabled me to work at and do, and thank You for the potential of the future, and everything You are leading me to do in Your Kingdom. May Your Kingdom come on earth, Lord Jesus, and may Your glory be seen by all the world! **Alleluia!**

Meditation

Jesus, You are there:

Dissatisfy my soul with mortal and material things,
and excite me by the potential of Your presence.

Jesus, stay close at hand:

Break through my mundane triviality this very day,
and bring me the delights of your joy and happiness.

Jesus, keep nearby:

So when I travel, cover me with safety and security
and consecrate my every journey by Your company.

Jesus, walk with me:

Then as we speak, lift up my soul in spiritual delight,
and stir me up by the power of Your glorious truth.

Jesus, never leave me:

Melt my damaged heart by love's extreme simplicity,
and restore my flagging spirit by Your forgiving care.

Bible Passage

James 4:1-6

¹ Where do these fights and quarrels between you come from? Is it not your desires battling within you? ² You long to have something you do not have, so you commit murder; and you are jealous and unable to get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask for the wrong reasons, in order to spend what you get on what you want for yourself.

⁴ You unfaithful people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility to God? So anyone who wants to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that scripture has no reason for saying that God yearns for the spirit He has placed within us with jealousy? ⁶ Rather, He gives even greater grace, which is why scripture says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

Review

Throughout his letter, James writes with incisive honesty about the sins of the Christians to whom he writes, and he urges his readers to return to the core values of the Gospel. Perhaps the wisest way for us to approach James' letter is to see in it an appeal to God's people to return to the fundamental principles of the Gospel message. For they, and they alone provide the moral and ethical backbone for good and godly behaviour. If the Christian is diverted from these principles by the pressures of life and of worldly affairs, then the grace of God is ignored and the work of the church is compromised.

In this passage, James is concerned at 'fights and quarrels' within the Christian community. As we read this our hearts may well sink, remembering contentious church meetings or discussions we have witnessed, which reflect all too easily what James says. He has already spoken out against ungodly prejudice within the church (2:1-7), and railed against the use of the '*tongue*' to curse and not bless (3:1f.). So now James tackles the contentious nature of the church. This is an important subject, because many church divisions are but covers for disagreements between Christians about everything from doctrine to church routine and practice.

In the first three verses of this extract, James asks where these difficulties and divisions come from within the church (4:1), and then gives an immediate answer. This is a rare case of the Bible giving a direct answer to an ethical problem! The roots of divisiveness, he says, come from within, from '*desires battling within you*' (4:1), which results in '*murder ... quarrelling and fighting*' (4:2). At this point, it is tempting to stand back and try to extract ourselves from this passage, for we are not aware of physical fights or even murders at church! What does James mean?

We must ask this; is James' talk of fighting and murder literal or figurative? In the rough world of the Roman Empire we should not be surprised at such talk, but did James really know about fights or murder in the church? We cannot know, but his writing here makes more sense to us if we interpret his words figuratively. To this day, when we speak about fighting people for things we do not mean physical fighting, just verbal fighting or intellectual

sparring with our peers; we are all aware of such 'battles' within the church. Murder, however, is something else, but we can certainly injure people sufficiently to make them leave church, or take offence and react very strongly. Though we do describe this as 'murdering' people, it may feel like this for some. I am stretching our understanding of these terms here, but this is surely what lies behind James' words, and while divisive and selfish behaviour is still a part of church life, we need to hear James' rebuke.

But James then goes further, adding the comment '*you do not have because you do not ask*' (4:3). This is interesting, because it calls to mind Jesus' famous teaching '*ask, and it will be given to you, seek, and you will find ...*' (Matthew 7:7). Ever since Jesus said this some have thought it means they can get what they want from God. But James explains here that this is entirely wrong; '*you ask and do not receive because you ask for the wrong reasons, in order to spend what you get on what you want for yourselves!*' (4:3). In this instance, failure before God is a result of selfishness. Moreover, to ask God for material and worldly benefits is the very antithesis of Jesus' distinctive teaching about holiness, '*love one another*' (John 13:34). The Christian is called to seek the good of others, not self, and James' critique is damning of those who use the church to pursue their own wants and desires, something that is unfortunately common.

James continues by trying to persuade his readers to ditch the material and worldly desires by which they damage their relationship with God (4:6). The fundamental Gospel message calls on the believer to abandon '*friendship with the world*' and trust in God for all things, including earthly provision. The world is the domain of 'the enemy' (Matthew 13:25, Luke 10:19, John 14:30,16:11), and the Kingdom of God is the domain of His rule. The Christian, while living in this world, is called to set up God's Kingdom rule within it, not to import the ways of the world into the church.

As James concludes this fascinating passage, however, he says something rather strange. He appears to refer to a scripture which says, '*God yearns for the spirit that He has placed within us*', but no such text can be found in the Bible! It is best to read verse 5 as a summary of several scriptural texts, put together in order to make a point. This is what happens in a number of other famous 'quoted' texts (e.g. Romans 3:10-18), so we should not therefore be stumped by this here. James says here that God 'yearns' for the exclusive allegiance of the human soul, where the word 'jealousy' is best understood as referring to 'exclusivity'. He means that God is singularly and exclusively searching for us, and He looks for our singular and exclusive response. If we look at these passages of the Old Testament, Gen 6:3; Ex 20:3,5; Is 63:8-15; Zech 1:14; 8:2, then we will find there the elements of what James says here, even if he has put it together rather selectively!

The choice faced by the Christian is not simply whether to 'believe in Jesus' or not, but whether to be committed to Christ, and committed enough for it to change life and behaviour. We may not feel up to such a great call, but as James continues to say, God is always offering a '*greater grace*' than people perceive (4:5). This wonderful and powerful idea is gleaned by him from Proverbs 3:34, which says, '*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*'. Those who are humble and have no personal investment except in the gracious love of Christ are far more likely to have a faith that makes sense to others than those who watch out for their own selfish interests.

None of us can escape the glaring challenge of James' words. To what extent do we allow the world's self-centred values to dominate our lives, so that instead of maintaining the purity of God's Kingdom, we allow Satan to create trouble and distress within God's church? We can easily point the finger at others, but how good are we at understanding our own faults?

Discipleship

Application

Fights and quarrels

No one can doubt that the church has suffered through fights and squabbling. We see it all the time, and the reason for it is probably twofold, firstly the clash of worldly and selfish attitudes as identified here by James. But secondly, it seems to me that many divisions happen because of sincerely held beliefs that people hold which are frankly very different. Some interpret a Bible passage this way, and others interpret it another; some believe absolutely in the principle of infant baptism, and others vehemently protest and advance an understanding of adult baptism. I could go on.

Yet I would still suggest that when we hold such strong opinions as Christians, even over such important matters, the enemy is not the opinions themselves. Too often, the problem is the passion and strength with which we hold on to them, which can sometimes be heightened by our selfish interests and desire to promote our own causes, not God's.

Think of it. Can you imagine that God wants His children to fight over the way that young people are instituted into the life of His church? The reasons for this, even if we do not understand it fully, must lie within our sinful selves; and if we can accept this, then we have a duty to recognise that any view of baptism itself is NOT fundamental to the Gospel. Our divisions reflect our problems, not the grace of God. So praise God for all God's people, baptised as infants or as adults, and get our priorities right!

God yearns to give us His 'greater grace'

This passage is remarkable because of its wonderful words about God's 'greater grace', a phrase picked up in a number of great hymns. James' words remind us that God's grace is always far bigger than we imagine, and when we remember this, we are encouraged. Moreover, God's provision is always greater, His love is always purer, His guidance is always more extensive, and His power is always far bigger than we have ever imagined, as well. If we forget this, then we lose our focus on the Gospel of Christ.

Ideas for what to do

- Recall those moments of division and unhappiness within the life of your own church and its people. On reflection, are there things you could have done to ensure that everything worked out better and according to God's plans?
- Pray for those who feel that they cannot cope with the difficulties within either your own church, or the church at large.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of James 4:1-6 do you find difficult to understand? Can any other member of the group help you with this?
2. How much fighting and battling do you find within the church? Can any of it be justified?

3. Do you feel that you can put your own feelings to one side in order to advocate the Kingdom of God? Or do you simply convey your own thoughts and feelings to others?

Final Prayer

How can we thank You, heavenly Father, for the immense privilege of being Your children, knowing that You have given us an eternal inheritance that goes beyond death and grants us a place in eternity! Glory be to You, our Father who is in heaven! Alleluia! AMEN