

The Danger of Being Worldly

James 4:1-6

Intro

Celebrity chef, writer, and TV personality Anthony Bourdain reflected on battling hedonism once in an interview. He wore a tattoo on his arm that read in ancient Greek, "I am certain of nothing," and he committed suicide on June 8, 2018, at the age of 61. In an interview for Men's Journal from 2014, Bourdain was asked: What are the benefits of hedonism, and what are the risks? Bourdain replied, "Look, I understand that inside me there is a greedy, gluttonous, lazy, hippie—you know? I understand that but there's a guy inside me who wants to lay in bed, and smoke weed all day, and watch cartoons, and old movies. I could easily do that. My whole life is a series of stratagems to avoid, and outwit, that guy. ... I'm aware of my appetites, and I don't let them take charge."

(Source: Sean Woods, "Anthony Bourdain on Writing, Hangovers, and Finding a Calling," Men's Journal, 2014).

To some degree we can relate to Anthony Bourdain. We all have appetites in us that are greedy, lazy and only want to seek pleasures and we battle against them. If they get out of control they only bring problems and suffering in the end. They are destructive.

This is what James deals with here in the beginning of chapter 4 in his Epistle. Let's look at what he says.

Context of James 4

Chapter 4 of James' letter continues the line of thinking we read in chapter 3. We observed in the last lesson the problem of worldly wisdom. Having bitter jealousy, envy, and selfish ambition reveals that we are following the wisdom of the world and not the wisdom of God. The result of worldly wisdom is disorder and every vile practice. Following the wisdom of world not only causes ruin to ourselves as individuals, but also causes problems for others and the church and the home.

Christians fighting with other Christians, divisions, hurt feelings, tension, and strife are readily seen by outsiders. The local church becomes dysfunctional as it cannot be a light in the community because they are fighting with one another. In this passage, James is going to further identify the sinfulness in people's lives that is causing these problems.

James 4:1

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"

We see here that James uses some intense language to describe the disagreements and problems that have arisen among the people in the early church. This was serious stuff!

The terms *fights* and *quarrels* are both used metaphorically of violent personal relationships which can lead to extreme destructive behaviour.

Every one of us has desires and lusts and passions and temptations that are inappropriate and unhealthy. James says that these fights and quarrels come from desires or pleasures. He uses the term "hedonon" twice in verses 1 and 3 in which we get the word "hedonist" and "hedonism."

Hedonism is basically the pursuit of pleasure and sensual self-indulgence. Hedonism is the uncontrolled personal desire to fulfill every passion and whim that promises sensual satisfaction. The desire to fulfill these pleasures comes from selfishness, which is opposed to God.

Paul wrote about this to Timothy, *“There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people”* (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

What the Apostle Paul is describing is the hedonistic lifestyle. Hedonism is a worldview and it can be traced back all the way to the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:6 says that Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit partly because it was a “delight” to her eye. There was a certain amount of pleasure that the fruit gave her when she beheld it, and, no doubt, a degree of pleasure that she thought she would have by eating it. In retrospect, however, Eve and Adam found only pain when they disobeyed and sinned (Gen. 3:7, 16–19).

The hedonistic mind says: ‘Whatever gives me a buzz, or thrills me, or gives me the warm fuzzies – that’s what I want. My feelings determine my choices. I accept only what makes me feel good, happy, comfortable, and excited. I reject what disturbs or troubles me, or is too demanding or difficult, or threatens my personal pleasure. I also reject whatever has ceased to thrill me and what is boring.’

As a society, this self-centred, sensual, pleasure-seeking, thrill-seeking mentality motivates much of our recreational activity, dictates our choice of moral standards. This line of thinking and acting is what causes serious problems. This is what James says that causes fights and quarrels. It is the result of evil desires “hedonism” battling within us. We need to submit to God and ask Him to help us get rid of our selfish desires.

James 4:2

“You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.”

When our desires for the wrong kind of pleasure are frustrated and unfulfilled they wage war and eventually to murder. In this verse James uses the word *kill* or *murder* as a hyperbole, and refers to hate and the logical ends of quarreling and fights. In this context it could include murderous hatred and extremely destructive behaviour. James' readers had not murdered anyone literally, at least not yet!

Jesus compared unrestrained anger with murder since anger is one of the roots of murder. In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”* This is very serious stuff. Jesus is saying that if you are angry with your fellow brother or sister without cause you will be judged as a murderer.

James 4:3

“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

Twice in the first three verses of chapter four, James uses the Greek word *hedonē*, from which we get the word "hedonism." We generally use the word "hedonism" as a kind of synonym for "decadence." But I would guess that at least 80% of the people on the face of the earth live by this unwritten principle: *"I will choose what seems to offer me the greatest happiness."*

Sounds pretty innocent but seeking personal happiness as our main goal in life means by definition:

- That we are not living to love others and seek their good when it conflicts with our own, and
- That we have not surrendered our lives to fulfill God's will and purpose for us.

The pursuit of personal happiness in a sense is being very selfish. But it is so common a personal philosophy that we take it for granted. Many Christians are more committed to their own personal happiness than they are in doing God's will.

We don't have what we want, James says in verse 2, because we do not ask God. Why is that? Sometimes it is because we are hesitant to bring God into our lives, since we might not like what He has to say. We prefer to go it on our own rather than follow God's way.

One of the reasons God doesn't give us what we ask for is because of our selfishness. Our motives are wrong. We ask not for a good purpose, but for a self-centered one, to spend it on our hedonism, our pleasures. Our selfishness and serving our pleasures blocks the answers to our prayers.

James 4:4 Flirting with Spiritual Adultery

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

Now James addresses the pleasure-seeking reader as "You adulteress!" You might think that he would use the masculine form of the word, "adulterer." He uses the feminine form deliberately, however, because he is referring to believers as married to God. This is a theme you can trace through the Old Testament where God's people were spoken of as God's wife, and He their Husband. In the New Testament the Church is considered as "the bride of Christ".

When a wife is married to one husband, but flirts with another lover, she is an adulterous. And that is what we are doing when we cozy up to the world system that doesn't love or follow Christ. Our love affair with pleasure, our friendliness towards that which grieves God, "is hatred toward God," James says. "Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." This is very serious stuff.

John writes about this also in 1 John 2:15-17, *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever."*

James 4:5

"Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?"

This verse is difficult to understand with precision. Some evangelical scholars do not all agree on its meaning. But looking at the context of what James is writing about perhaps the best rendering would be as follows: *"the spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy."* In effect James would be saying, "Don't you know that you yourselves are living proof of the truthfulness of Scripture, which clearly teaches that because of our fallen nature we have a tendency towards a spirit of envy."

Because we as His bride are adulteresses and have fallen in love with the world, in the end God is jealous and is longing for His people's love, rather than of their envious spirit. Folks! God desires our devotion and love. God is jealous for you and me. God does not want to share you with the world. It

is unclear to me why we have a difficult time understanding that God is jealous for our lives? We understand it in marriage but we don't seem to understand it in relation to God. He is jealous for us and will not accept second place.

James 4:6

"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

After rebuking us in an effort to see that our friendship with the world has separated us from God, James says something that gives us hope. *"But he gives us more grace."* We need to hear those words. We have fallen short of the relationship that God desires of us. We have been listening to the wisdom of the world and become friends with the world. But God gives more grace. God can help us overcome our selfness, our sinfulness. There is always enough grace to redeem us from what we have done because of Jesus. It is not time to give up. It is time to experience the grace of God.

This grace comes to those who humble themselves, not to the proud. There is no grace to the self-centered and those who act selfishly. There is no grace to those who continue to practice jealousy and envy. There is no grace for those who ignore God's call and continue to be friends with the world. But those who humble themselves will find grace. Stop being self-seeking and become God-seeking. God can fix this if you will seek Him and give yourself to Him. God's grace helps us in our struggles with sin. God's Spirit woos us to Him and, as we recognize our sins and humble ourselves in repentance.

Conclusion

Our desires can be overwhelming at times, and the world seems to fuel them more and more. But, by God's grace He will increase our faith when we develop more dependence on Him and less upon ourselves. We need to abandon ourselves to Christ as LORD, and never compromise with worldly reasoning and logic, nor bow to our emotions and rationalizations. Our drive must be to see Christ's supremacy so we follow Him and lift Him up as LORD and supreme in our lives. Reaching this point will be when our interests are surrendered to His and His interests will be ours. In the end we will not even want to seek our own selfish pleasure because it is more gratifying to serve and honour Christ.

If a new person comes to visit our church, what would they observe? Would they see our church as an example of how to love and care for one another or how to bicker and fight with one another? What about your home, your family? Is it one that quarrels or one that loves? What glorifies our Lord and leads to a better life: conflict and violence or love and peace?

Let us seek God's wisdom and live our lives in love, bringing growth and reconciliation. Let's glorify God in all that we say and do!

We are called to be world changers not world chasers!