

James 4.1-11
BCC, 2/15/25
Humble Repentance

EDT: In James 4.1-11, disordered desires fracture the community & cause them to be friends with the world. But by God's grace & through humble submission, the community can be restored.

DT: We fight our sinful desires by forging a friendship with God.

James 4 takes me back to fifth grade. In fifth grade, I learned that I hate UFC and MMA. UFC and MMA got pretty popular in my 5th-6th grade years. So, two of my buddies, Bobby (who was bigger than me) & Dalton (who was stronger than me) LOVED it. You might know where this is going... I hated MMA because these two friends liked to try out their new moves on people smaller and weaker than them, like me. I quickly learned what an arm bar not only looked like but felt like. I found out how long I could go without oxygen during a triangle chokehold. I don't like MMA...

My assigned passage today, James 4, brings me back to my 5th & 6th grade years. Because it feels like James immediately has me in a chokehold. It feels like James immediately comes out swinging... He isn't messing around. Look at James 4.1 with me, where he begins by saying, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?"

If you've been in ministry any time at all, you know that churches can easily begin to fight and quarrel among themselves. What causes fights and quarrels among you?

It's people like Aaron the arrogant. The person who tells you all the time that they are better than you and constantly talking themselves up and putting you down. Aaron the arrogant is the problem.

It's people like Paula the Perfect... the person who looks like they have everything beautifully together on the outside. Everything is always rainbows and sunshine, so when you bring up the mess of your life, Paula the perfect tells you... just try harder. You can do it. Paula the perfect is the problem!

It's people like Tina the two-timer. Tina is somebody who always comes up to you at church, smiles, has a friendly conversation to your face... and then rips you up behind your back. Tina the two-timer is the problem.

It is these kinds of people that cause fights and quarrels among us, right!? They're the problem!

James continues and says, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t you know they come from your desires that battle within you.” James would say that you are to blame. I am to blame. Collectively, our desires are battling within us, waging war on our souls, causing us to wage war with one another. We are to blame.

The word for desires in vs. 1 & v. 3 is the word that inspired our English word “hedonism,” and the three other times it is used in the NT, it is in a sinful context. These are sinful desires. And you can hear the negative effect that these sinful desires have on the relationships with God and with other people. Vs. 2-3 says, “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. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” Your sinful desires are causing a break both in your relationship with the people around and also with God himself. He’s not listening to your prayers any longer because you are asking for selfish things.

Then, James calls us adulterous! I can hear the OT prophets like Hosea screaming in the background. You remember the story of Hosea? God calls his prophet to marry a promiscuous woman, an unfaithful, a word we don’t like to say in church. Hosea is saying to God’s people, “That is you!” And James says the same thing, James 4:4 (NIV) — 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.” 4

NIV says chooses, but ESV says “wishes” to be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. Your sinful desires are yoking you to the world, which means you are at enmity, you are an enemy against God. This is allegiance & warfare language. You have picked your side. You’ve chosen the things of this world over the Creator of the world. Our sinful desires cut us off from God. We are to blame.

But what are these sinful desires? Just before our passage, at the end of James 3, there is a contrast of godly wisdom with earthly/worldly wisdom. James will say godly wisdom is shown through humility. But listen to what worldly wisdom looks like, James 3:14–16 (NIV) — 14 if you harbor bitter envy and But selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not

come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."

James is saying that the sinful desires in ch. 4 that are waging war in your relationship with the people around you and waging war with your relationship with God looks like envy & selfish ambition... It looks like comparison & competition.

As moms & dads, teachers & students, grandmas & grandpas, we don't struggle with envy or selfish ambition, do we? We don't struggle with comparison or competition.

I could share with you so many times in my life where comparison & competition got the best of me... One time was when I was here at BCC during COVID Warren & I did Monday's with Michael & Wednesdays with Warren. Shout out to Jennifer for the name. And we would give a short devotional thought from the Bible for our people. It was fun! But what ended up happening is that I began to look at the amount of views I had for my videos... 100 views, 200 views, 300 views, 1000 views on one video! I loved it! Because I told myself more people would hear the good news of Jesus... but in my heart, I was finding my identity in performance... My heart was filled with envy (I wanted more views!). Selfish ambition (I'm better than other people). And I did all of it, in the name of God.

Though we may begin something with pure motives, the evil one is crafty and knows how to twist our desires towards envy & selfish ambition. I think vs. 1-4 forces us to ask the question: What do I really want? What do I really desire? Do I desire a room full of people... so that I'm seen? Do I desire people to be impressed by me... so that I'm envied? Do I desire praise & admiration from others... so that I can temporarily feel love? Or do I desire God?

If we are honest with ourselves, what we will likely find is that there is a mixed bag of desires within us. A desire to both do our jobs well for God's glory AND a desire for our own glory. A desire to help others so they can be comforted in their time of need AND a desire that we will look compassionate. A desire to help disciple someone in their journey with Jesus AND a desire for them to think we have all the answers. We have conflicting desires, and left unchecked, they wage war against our relationships with one another & with God himself.

Let's get ruthlessly honest today... What do you desire? Name them. Write them down. Put them in your notes app on your phone. And be honest.

Because left unchecked, left in the dark, these desires will grow and grow and grow, and like a little ember that grows it will turn into a ferocious flame that will ruin our relationship with God and one another. James wasn't joking when he said that these desires lead to death, quarrels, and fighting.

I think it is helpful for us to recognize the forces that are waging war against us, and according to our text (and the ancient fathers and mothers of the faith) we have 3 forces waging war against us: the world, the flesh, & the devil. John Mark Comer in *Live No Lies*, helpfully notes how the 3 are at play with one another waging war against us (show slide).

Deceitful ideas (v. 8, the Devil) – that play into our Disordered Desires (v. 1-3, the Flesh) – Normalized in a sinful society (v. 4, the World)

So, as we think back to the deceitful ideas: that nobody loves us, that we have to earn God's love and other people's approval and praise, that we will only find security in our finances and family... these lies play into our disordered, sinful, fleshly desires (our comparison & competition), that are then normalized in this world.

When I think about our problem & friendship with the world, I think about the image of a ladder. Our world is built upon climbing and achieving. Our world is built upon performance. Our world is built upon popularity. Our world is built upon perfection. Our world is built on climbing the ladder so that we can ultimately feel loved by God and other people.

So, we feel as if we must embody these values to be loved and climb up the ladder of friendship with the world. And what ends up happening is we feel like we can't let go... Friendship with the world is all we know...

I don't know about you, but I feel like James has me in a chokehold, and I don't want to let go of the worldly ladder... Too often, this is my story.

So where do we go from here?

Thankfully for us, we have a God who is gracious & kind. We have a God who is jealously pursuing us. We have a God who desires us. We have a God who is the solution. After calling us adulterers, James doesn't tell us to go fix ourselves. He tells us that God still wants us.

James 4:5 (NIV) — 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?"

Vs. 5 has a bunch of difficulties, but I think the main thrust is that throughout the OT Scriptures, we see that God is jealous for his people. He is committed to them, like a husband committed to His wife. He jealously wants what is best for her & protects her. And therefore, he wants her to be committed to Him. He wants her commitment. He wants her loyalty. He wants her relationship.

But so far in the passage we have seen... that's not the case! We have rejected God and instead gotten into bed with the world. But here's the good news.. no matter what you desire, no matter what you wrote down earlier, what does God desire? The answer is: you. God desires you. He wants you. He wants me. He jealously longs for us & vs. 6 tells us, "6 But he gives us more grace."

God gives us more grace. It is in the moments we need it the most, that God gives us the grace we need to overcome the forces that are waging war against our soul because He wants us.

To me, Vs. 5-6 is the center of the passage because it reminds us of the Gospel. While we were still his enemies, while we were still friends with the world, Christ died for us. He didn't leave us on our own. Instead, he gave us more grace because He desired us.

So, as we consider how to fight against the enemies that are waging war against our souls, we must recognize that God is the one enabling us to fight & win this war. If we try to fight the war on our own we will lose. But he gives us more grace.

So how do we fight in this war? DT: We fight our sinful desires by forging a friendship with God.

In this war, what is our greatest weapon? It isn't trying harder! It isn't performing more! It isn't trying to be perfect. Our greatest weapon in this war is actually friendship with God. The weapon we need most is friendship with God because as we grow closer to God, we are naturally being pulled away from the world, the flesh, & the devil.

Friendship with God isn't explicitly in the text, but it is certainly there. The opposite of friendship with the world is friendship with God & James has already brought up the theme in James 2:23 (NIV) — 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend."

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the most important idea you probably need to hear this week is something you already know; it is a reminder that God desires a relationship with you, and as Jesus does with the disciples in John 15, He desires to call you His friend. As Justin Earley says about friendship, "The gospel of our salvation in Jesus is not just reflective of friendship – it is friendship. The friendship of Jesus means that one way to summarize the gospel is this: Jesus knows you fully and loves you anyway." God sees you in all your sins & junk, and he desires a friendship with you anyways.

We fight our sinful desires by forging a friendship with God. But what does friendship with God look like? (v. 6b-10)

Friendship with God begins and is sustained with humility (v. 6b, 10).

v6b. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Fast forward to v. 10, James 4:10 (NIV) — 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

In this passage, James sounds a lot like his brother, Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was constantly saying things like, "those who humble themselves will be exalted. But those exalt themselves will be humbled." Here, James brackets his shotgun of 10 exhortations with the idea of humility because it is the beginning point of friendship with God. If we want to grow in our friendship with God, it must always be centered on humility.

Biblically speaking, humility looks like the exact opposite of the world's values. The world entices us to try and climb up the ladder of success, and performance, and popularity! To get us to believe that the more influence we have, the better we are! "If you want to win people to Christ, your greatest weapon is influence & power!" That's a lie straight from the devil himself...

I think one of the best definitions for humility is a stepping down, a stepping down from the worldly ladder, a stepping down off our pedestal and platform of our lives so that God can be glorified and exalted, rather than ourselves. Think of Philippians 2, where Jesus does not consider equality with God something to be grasped or used for his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant... He stepped down from his heavenly throne...

Friendship with God begins and is sustained with this humility. Each of the exhortations James gives us in the following verses, are different ways we can step down. James 4:7–10 (NIV) — 7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. near to God and he will come near to you. Wash

your hands, 8 Come you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

Each of these exhortations – submit to God, place yourself under his authority! Resist the devil and his ways! Come near to God! Wash, purify, grieve – in other words, Repent! Humble yourselves – each of these exhortations is an invitation into humility and friendship with God. They are an invitation to step down from the worldly ladders of success.

And as we step down... in submission to God's commands; as we step down... in resistance to the devil's ways; as we step down... in repentance to our selfish desires, we are naturally stepping towards friendship with God – we are stepping away from friendship with the world and drawing near to a friendship with God. And once we step down from the ladder of performance and platform, we're finally able to follow our savior and pick up a cross. We can't pick up a cross if our hands are busy holding a ladder.

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The problem with the worldly ladder is that it works... at least for a while. As you ascend the ladder, you get noticed. As you ascend the ladder, you get affirmation. As you ascend the ladder, you get praised. And it feels dangerous to let go.

Because it is dangerous. Because when you let go, and step down from the ladder, it feels like a death... because it is a death. You are dying to your sinful desires. You are dying to envy and selfish ambition. You are dying to comparison and competition, so that you might live as a friend of God forever (which is exactly what God wants).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning is an opportunity to get right with God, to humbly repent, to let go of the ladder, step down, and to draw near to Him.

Final question I want you to consider: as His friend, how is God calling you to humbly respond?

Is he calling you to Submit (v. 7): to stop living and leading out of your own power and control & instead trust Him to do?

Is he calling you to draw near (v. 8): to stop letting the shame of your past mistakes keep you at a distance from him? God is drawing near to you; will you draw near to Him?

Is he calling you to Repent (v. 9): to bring your sins to the light & boldly and courageously confess them to him & other people so that he can begin your healing process?

God is inviting us to trade our envy and selfish ambition for a friendship with Him. And friendship with God always begins when we loosen our grip on the ladder and trust the God who promises: "Humble yourselves before the LORD and He will lift you up."